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**The Moral Architecture of the Household
in Shakespeare's Comedies**

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Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial
fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of
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ABSTRACT

Critics have long neglected Shakespearean comedy's examination of the household's role in the formulation of community values by reading its references to domestic life allegorically as commentary on the ostensibly more important public realms of marketplace and state. This dissertation argues that representations of the household in the comedies are best understood as theatrical explorations of ethical inquiry as it pertains to everyday lived experience. Using contemporary sermons, political tracts, and conduct books to situate Shakespeare's plays within a larger cultural movement that was coming to understand the household as a foundation of the moral economy of early modern England, this study provides readings of *The Comedy of Errors*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and *The Tempest* that emphasize each play's investigation of the household as a potential locus of the good life. The characters in these plays develop an awareness of themselves as members of broader communities by negotiating the particular details of household existence--by sharing meals, exchanging gifts, and falling in love. This awareness is in turn presented as a necessary component of personal happiness and a fundamental constituent of a just and merciful state. By developing an account of household life in the plays, this dissertation argues that recognizing the importance of affective domestic relations to constructions of the self as socially embedded moral agent is crucial to understanding the comedies' nuanced analysis of gender, class, and race relations.

RÉSUMÉ

Les critiques ont longtemps omis de tenir compte de l'analyse que Shakespeare fait dans ses comédies du rôle du foyer dans la formulation des valeurs communautaires, ne voyant dans ses allusions à la vie domestique qu'une allégorie du marché et de l'État, lesquels forment un univers public ostensiblement plus important. Cette thèse soutient que les représentations du foyer dans ces comédies doivent être perçues comme des explorations théâtrales de l'interrogation éthique relevant de l'expérience quotidienne de l'existence. Sur la base de sermons contemporains, de pamphlets politiques et de manuels de savoir-vivre qui permettent de replacer les pièces de Shakespeare dans un contexte culturel plus large où le foyer est finalement considéré comme l'élément fondateur de l'économie morale des débuts de l'Angleterre moderne, cette étude donne une lecture de *The Comedy of Errors*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* et de *The Tempest* qui insiste sur l'analyse que ces pièces font du foyer comme lieu potentiel d'une vie agréable. Les personnages de ces pièces acquièrent une conscience d'eux-mêmes comme membres de communautés plus larges en négociant les détails particuliers de l'existence au foyer, en partageant des repas, en échangeant des cadeaux et en tombant amoureux. Cette prise de conscience est à son tour présentée comme un élément nécessaire au bonheur personnel et comme élément fondamental d'un État juste et

miséricordieux. En analysant le récit de la vie au foyer de ces pièces, cette thèse soutient qu'il est essentiel de reconnaître l'importance des rapports domestiques affectifs dans la construction du moi comme agent moral socialement imbriqué pour bien saisir l'analyse nuancée que ces comédies font des rapports entre sexes, entre classes sociales et entre races.

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NOTE ON TEXTS

Many of the texts that I quote in this study have not been edited since they first appeared in the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries. I have retained the original spelling, punctuation, and capitalization used in these editions, although I have silently expanded contractions in the few instances in which they appeared. My decision to follow early modern editorial practice in these matters reflects my desire to emphasize the relationship between these early printed texts and the particular historical moments in which they were produced. I cite the short titles of these texts in my footnotes, except when the original long form provides important additional information about subject matter. In instances when the meaning of a quotation risks being lost due to unfamiliar or ambiguous vocabulary, I have added a gloss in square brackets immediately following the unclear word.

Unless otherwise indicated, citations of Shakespeare are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans, et al., 2nd ed. (1974; Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997); references to this edition appear parenthetically in my text. In order to avoid confusion, I have omitted the square brackets used by the Riverside editors to indicate textual emendations.

Introduction

Household Matters in Shakespearean Comedy

In Shakespeare's comedies the household is a moral space. That is, the household--more than any other social or economic institution--is the space within which the characters of Shakespeare's plays negotiate and implement their particular visions of the good life. The household is also, of course, the space within which these characters meet their most basic needs for survival; they eat and sleep and make love and raise children within the architectural confines of their homes. But it is as a nexus of human relationships--some biological, some legal, some religious, all emotionally binding--that the household plays its most important role in defining the values and evaluating the behaviour of characters in Shakespearean drama.

Whether set in ancient Rome or in early modern England, in a peasant cottage or in a royal palace, virtually every play in the Shakespearean canon recounts the story of one or more households. Sometimes the households in question are in conflict with one another; just as often they are internally unstable. Frequently the stability and coherence

of the household is threatened both from within and from without. *Twelfth Night*, for instance, details the comic infighting among various hangers-on of an aristocratic household. Despite Malvolio's efforts to manage the Countess Olivia's household with a disciplined hand, the heiress's drunken uncle Sir Toby Belch and his parasitic companion Sir Andrew Aguecheek cause no end of domestic turmoil as they try to humiliate the sober steward and to upset his rigid control of household matters. Even the noble Olivia herself, still mourning a brother long dead, is associated with the mundane routines of housekeeping. When he returns to the lovelorn Orsino to report on his attempts to woo Olivia on the duke's behalf, Valentine describes the countess:

. . . like a cloistress she will veiled walk,
 And water once a day her chamber round
 With eye-offending brine; all this to season
 A brother's dead love, which she would keep fresh
 And lasting in her sad remembrance.

(I.i.27-31)

In Valentine's homey image, the silent and solitary Olivia nurtures her sorrow in a notably commonplace manner--by crying in her room. As the servingman's curiously mixed domestic metaphors imply, however, Olivia's grief seems to exceed its emphatically ordinary setting. While she appears at first in his image as a devoted gardener, sprinkling the

flower of love for her brother with watery tears in order to keep it fresh, she is quickly transformed into a monstrous cook who pickles her brother's "dead love" in salty tears. Valentine's prosaic metaphors at once accentuate and clash with the eeriness of Olivia's obsession, underscoring both the gravity and the banality of her grief.

For Lear, as for Olivia, the household represents cloistered security from an invasive, even threatening, world. In *King Lear*, however, domestic turmoil assumes epic proportions as the aging monarch tries to cling to both personal dignity and public honour despite the machinations of greedy children, political foes, and a hostile natural world. As Lear himself recognizes, the household provides essential shelter from the elements:

Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en
Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp,
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,
And show the heavens more just.

(III.iv.28-36)

Personifying the absent household as a heroic defender, the aging patriarch experiences the first stirring of genuine

empathy as he contemplates the vulnerability entailed by a "houseless" life.

If Lear develops sympathy for those who must survive without the basic protection offered by the household, however, he remains steadfastly oblivious to the consequences for his family of his own decision to unhouse himself. Having divided his kingdom among his three children, Lear moves into his eldest daughter's home, assuming that although he has sacrificed his political power he will be able to retain his authority in the domestic sphere. In a brief scene devoted to relating the disruptions generated by this new living arrangement, Goneril describes household life with an autocratic father no longer engrossed by affairs of state:

By day and night he wrongs me, every hour
 He flashes into one gross crime or other
 That sets us all at odds. I'll not endure it.
 His knights grow riotous, and himself upbraids us
 On every trifle.

(I.iii.3-7)

Having taken early retirement and moved in with Goneril and her husband, Lear proceeds to shatter the domestic quiet of the Albany household. He carouses in the palace with his rowdy friends until all hours and makes a habit of challenging his grown daughter's authority in her own home. Goneril's use of the political metaphor "riotous" to

describe the behaviour of her father's knights accentuates the subversive effect of Lear's presence in her household. Lear "still would manage those authorities / That he hath given away," and such a usurpation of Goneril's authority as wife and mistress of the house is intolerable (I.iii.17-18).

Like *King Lear*, a number of Shakespeare's tragedies focus on the sometimes uneasy relationship between domestic and civic authority, but it is the comedies that explore most thoroughly the possibility that the mundane world of the household might operate as a counter to the public realms of the market and the state. In each of the three plays that I analyze in detail in this study--*The Comedy of Errors*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and *The Tempest*--identity is constructed through the idiomatic experiences of daily life. By negotiating the particular details of household existence--by sharing meals, exchanging gifts, and falling in love--the characters in these plays develop both a sense of themselves and an awareness of the importance of their roles in the formulation of broader community values. The marketplace and the commonwealth exist at the periphery of these plays, but their moral centre is firmly located in the particularized realm of the household. It is because of this explicit interest in the household as a locus for formulations of the good life, then, that I have made these three comedies my central texts.

My decision to work with these plays is also constituted as an indirect challenge to the "genre snobbery" that ranks comedy well below tragedy in a hierarchy of dramatic modes.¹ While comedy is devalued in part because of its lack of gravity, I suspect that its focus on ordinary life also accounts for a good deal of the genre's critical depreciation. In other words, academics are conditioned to equate comedy's quotidian preoccupations with a lack of philosophical depth.² The sense that the ordinariness of its domestic subject matter ought somehow to preclude a play from serious attention was certainly of concern for Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights. In the prologue to *A Woman Killed With Kindness*, for instance, Thomas Heywood apologizes for the prosaic inspirations of his domestic tragedy. "Look for no glorious state," he warns his audience, "our Muse is bent / Upon a barren subject, a bare scene."³

¹See Russ McDonald, "Fear of Farce" in *"Bad" Shakespeare: Revaluations of the Shakespearean Canon*, ed. Maurice Charney (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1988), 77.

²Taxonomies of Shakespearean drama often speak eloquently of this bias. Consider, for example, Ralph Berry's decision to include chapters on the "Early" and "Middle" comedies, but on the "Mature Histories" and the "Major Tragedies" (see *Shakespeare and Social Class* [Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1988]).

³Thomas Heywood, *A Woman Killed with Kindness*, ed. R. W. Van Fossen (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961), 3.

As I will demonstrate throughout this study, even scholars who have undertaken the specific task of rescuing Shakespeare's comedies from critical marginalization have often redeemed them at the expense of an emphasis on their preoccupation with household life. Rather than seeking to understand the comedies' explorations of this "realm of particularity"⁴ as an intrinsic component of their commentary, many critics instead seek to allegorize these plays. Thus Leonard Tennenhouse argues that *Measure for Measure*--which he re-classifies as an "absent monarch play"--must be understood as intentionally "authorizing" James I's absolutist policies. More specifically, he argues that the failure of Angelo's attempts to victimize Isabella should be read as emblematic of the victory of the mechanism of the absolutist state over the individual power of any of its lieutenants.⁵ The problem with such an allegorized interpretation is the extent to which it excludes the evidence of Isabella's particular experiences as both a biological and a spiritual sister. Presenting her as a token to be attacked, exchanged, or protected by the figures of male authority in the play, rather than recognizing her

⁴Political philosopher Jean Bethke Elshtain uses this phrase to refer to the private world. I adopt it here because it evokes the specificity of experience that I want to argue Shakespearean comedy ascribes to the household. See *Public Man, Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

⁵Leonard Tennenhouse, *Power on Display: The Politics of Shakespeare's Genres* (New York: Methuen, 1986), 156.

as an active player in the drama of her own destiny, this reading universalizes Isabella's experience to the point of emptying it of meaning. On such an account, Isabella exists merely to tempt Angelo into sinning and thereby revealing the limits of his own power. A reading which acknowledges *Measure for Measure's* interest in a non-public power authorized by the household (in this case the all-female household of the Clarist convent) enables us, on the other hand, to recognize that Isabella is far from being a powerless cipher. She is an active agent who is instrumental in exposing a tyranny in which both Angelo and the not-so-absent Duke Vincentio are deeply implicated.⁶

I do not mean to suggest that Shakespearean comedy is uninterested in investigating wider social and political issues. As Camille Wells Slights has recently demonstrated, Shakespeare's comedies provide shrewd commentary on early modern social institutions and behaviour.⁷ Rather, my goal is to draw attention to the particular standpoint from which the comedies address such larger ideological concerns. My project is grounded in a feminist epistemology that insists

⁶For such a reading, see Jessica Slights and Michael Holmes, "Isabella's Order: Religious Acts and Personal Desires in *Measure for Measure*," *Studies in Philology* 95.3 (1998), 263-92.

⁷Slights's assertion that the comedies "scrutinize and seek to shape the society that shaped them" has been formative to my thinking about the cultural work accomplished by early modern theatre. Camille Wells Slights, *Shakespeare's Comic Commonwealths* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 236.

on the importance of what historically and materially situated selves actually do, rather than in the normative aim of determining what an impossibly ideal knower ought to do. I seek to explore the explanatory, transformative, and emancipatory potential of the everyday. The plays that I discuss here consistently maintain that their characters' contributions need not occur at court or in the marketplace in order to effect meaningful change; nor must their activities have a direct impact on public policy or commercial practice--even allegorically--in order to register as powerfully formative social/moral principles.

My general aim here is to develop alternative ways of situating dramatic literature in the broader contexts of social history and cultural practice. By combining readings of specific Shakespearean comedies with an analysis of the discourses of householding that occupied such a significant space in early modern life, I seek to demonstrate that evidence from literature--evidence conspicuously absent, as at least one critic has noted, from recent accounts of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century social history--can provide useful clues to the *mentalité* of early modern England.⁸ Shakespeare's plays cannot, of course, be

⁸See Kathleen E. McLuskie's insightful but brief article, "'Tis But a Woman's Jar': Family and Kinship in Elizabethan Drama," *Literature and History* 9 (1983): 228-39. McLuskie introduces the notion of *mentalité* to account for the useful ways in which creative writing of the early modern period (particularly drama) can be used to shed light on the *epistème* of the age.

expected to provide accurate demographic information about the early modern household. We ask of literature that it present plausible worlds, not real ones and, as Marianne Novy reminds us, Shakespeare's plays are "theatrical transformations of the social tensions that give them some of their subject matter and their appeal to a divided audience, not examples of Elizabethan social history."⁹

I want to argue that early modern drama can usefully be read as one way of better understanding how an institution like the household was being talked about in the Renaissance. I take as a theoretical starting point my conviction that popular theatre functions as an instrument of cultural problem solving. More specifically, I claim that theatrical representations of the household operated for playwright and audience alike as a means of thinking through political, economic, and moral questions raised in a time of profound social change. Contemporary sermons, tracts, and conduct books testify to the centrality of the household to early modern models of community. I argue here that Shakespeare's representations of domestic space in the comedies can be read as critical responses to paternalistic models of householding and (by metaphoric extension) of nation-building that were finding increasing support in England at the turn of the seventeenth century. Even more

⁹Marianne Novy, *Love's Argument: Gender Relations in Shakespeare* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 6.

importantly, I argue that Shakespeare participates in a larger cultural movement preoccupied with identifying the household as a potential locus of the good life.

I should acknowledge at this point that of the plays I discuss at length, only *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is set in Tudor England and engages directly with contemporary debates about the nature of householding and the role of the household as a possible site of actively ethical and meaningful existence. The geographically and temporally distant settings of the other plays do not, however, preclude their usefulness to my analysis since it is clear that *The Comedy of Errors* and *The Tempest* are equally engaged in exploring the concrete particularities of quotidian existence and the impact that such particularities can have on the lives of both individuals and communities.

It is my general contention, then, that these domestically oriented comedies investigate the household as a site for the good life and that their theatrical evaluation of the role of the household is part of a more general cultural movement that was coming to understand the household as one of the foundations of the moral economy of early modern England. The collapse of an older feudal and monastic order in post-dissolution England resulted in a displacement of the good life from some "special range of

higher activities" to the sphere of "life" itself.¹⁰ This general veneration of household existence resulted in a lively contemporary debate over the proper management of households, and, as I demonstrate throughout this study, it also resulted in theatrical explorations of the implications of this new focus on ordinary life for early modern individuals and communities.

I begin in Chapter One by locating my work at the intersection of contemporary debates about the practice of literary criticism and philosophical debates about the relationship between the domestic and civic sides of social existence. Having identified a tendency in Shakespeare studies either to ignore or to allegorize dramatic representations of domestic experience, I move to an exploration of the status of the household in political philosophy and social history. I argue that this allegorizing impulse has its roots in prominent strains of material and metaphysical history that present household experiences as non-public and therefore as intrinsically unimportant. Although the household has played a central role in analyses of the principles governing human existence and behaviour since Plato and Aristotle first disagreed about the nature of its relationship to the state, it has most often been read either as cipher of or embryonic

¹⁰Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 213.

prototype for the state, which is a more public and ostensibly more important institution.

The emancipatory aims of politicized accounts of Shakespearean drama have in turn led numerous Marxist and feminist critics to this account of household/state relations as an exemplum of exclusionary political practice. Such arguments take different forms, but among the most common is the claim that patriarchalism at both the household and state levels denied all authority to early modern women. The readings enabled by such a model inevitably understand the female characters of Shakespeare's plays as disempowered subjects. This is admittedly a highly simplified caricature of what are often sophisticated arguments, but it does reflect a common understanding of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century political theory, historical practice, and dramatic representation.

I contend here that in order to account for the positive valuations of household life in Shakespearean comedy, critics need to look to another model of the relationship between *oikos* and *polis* in post-Reformation England, one that saw in the affective relationships of the household an important source of moral grounding for all members of the commonwealth. Instead of understanding domestic politics either as a pale echo or an originary model of the state, these accounts propose that the household prepares individuals for citizenship.

Following William James Booth, whose study of the place of the economy in the moral architecture of our communities was basic to my first thinking about the household,¹¹ I argue that early modern women and men were citizens of two worlds simultaneously: members of non-market, household communities and of the wider, less personal communities in which the household is inevitably embedded. But while Booth argues for a "radical incommensurability" of the worlds of household and market, I suggest that Shakespearean comedy offers a vision of, if not synthesis, then at least coexistence of the two.

¹¹William James Booth, *Households: On The Moral Architecture of the Economy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

Chapter One

Hegemonies, Historicisms, and Housewives

This study is primarily a work of literary criticism. My principal goal is to provide a fresh perspective on a series of Shakespearean comedies and characters that have often been either underrated or misunderstood by most serious scholars. My work also has an important historical component. Having identified the household as a significant institution for early modern dramatists, I seek, as well, to analyze and to evaluate the broader cultural importance of this most basic unit of social order. The project's theoretical claims are perhaps its most ambitious element; certainly its implications reach well beyond the textually and chronologically specific issues this study seeks to address. My argument is polemical rather than simply expository. I am calling for what Jean Elshtain has designated a "redemption of everyday life."¹ It is my contention that the plays I consider here have been either overlooked or misread as a result of a tendency on the part

¹Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 334-35.

of recent critics to ignore, to neglect, or to undervalue the important contributions of everyday life. As I demonstrate, this tendency to devalue the household extends well beyond literary criticism. Developing a better understanding of the role played by the household in both early modern dramatic literature and in the ideological self-construction of a particular historical moment (or series of moments) entails a rethinking of the way that literary criticism has been practised throughout much of the 1980s and 1990s. It is with such a rethinking that I begin here.

With the notable exception of feminist criticism, new historicism has undoubtedly been the most dominant critical trend to emerge in early modern studies in the final decades of the twentieth century. New historicism's materialist emphasis on the modes and means of literary production has certainly paved the way for a project interested in material domestic matters. Nevertheless, this now hegemonic set of critical values has also bequeathed to academe an obsession with displays of public power that have consistently marginalized the mundane in favour of the spectacular, the domestic in favour of the more overtly political.

The enduring legacy of new historicism is, I think, twofold. On one hand, it is a movement that has styled itself as inclusive, and has promoted a critical practice notable for its tendency toward expansion. Influential

scholars such as Stephen Greenblatt and Louis Montrose have drawn our attention to the dangers of a universalizing formalist criticism that was characterized by its impulse to focus on the literary text in isolation from the social formations within which it was produced, and whose primary handicap was its proclivity for identifying the values of its own culture as immutable home truths. New historicists of various stripes have since argued that early modern literature must instead be understood as part of a particular historical culture. As Edward Pechter first put it concisely in 1987, "The new historical criticism aims at putting the text back into the context from which it was generated."² In order to understand the particularities of historical moments, such arguments ran, we need to look beyond the confines of the literary text to the texts of history itself. This goal of reading the referential literary work in relation to non-literary texts that could extend and multiply its ways of meaning resulted in a broadening of the canon of texts considered acceptable for study in departments of literature.

If new historicism has widened the field of study for scholars of Renaissance literature by narrowing the gap between literary and non-literary texts, however, its political preoccupations have had a tendency to collapse

²Edward Pechter, *What Was Shakespeare?: Renaissance Plays and Changing Critical Practice*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 51.

that field of study in other significant ways. As Pechter has pointed out, attempts to counterpoise cultural experiences and literary texts have often failed, and the Marxist impetus of the new historicism has often resulted in the valuation of cultural experience over literary interpretation. Although Greenblatt, for instance, is careful to deny the primacy of presumed cultural or historical facts over literary interpretation--he reminds us that "If . . . literature is viewed exclusively as the expression of social rules and instructions, it risks being absorbed entirely into an ideological superstructure"³--in practice the flow of his criticism is not interanimative but unidirectional, from the cultural to the literary text. The effect of this critical impetus is to privilege the cultural text as something fixed and unequivocal against which the literary text can be measured.

If new historicism managed to marginalize the literary text in favour of an ostensibly transparent cultural one, it succeeded simultaneously in funnelling critical energy into a series of narrow debates about the nature, sites, and movements of power. Although influenced by Marx,⁴ and

³Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 4.

⁴I am thinking in particular of new historicism's attention to the modes and means of literary production, a critical impulse that has its roots in a dialectical materialism born of early Marxist thought. For an opposing
(continued...)

shaped in less obvious ways by the methods (if not the political agenda) of at least two generations of feminist thinkers, new historicism owes perhaps its greatest debt to Michel Foucault's theories about the "omnipresence of power." "Power," according to Foucault, "is everywhere . . . because it comes from everywhere." Armed with this master concept of power as a "permanent, repetitious, inert, and self-reproducing . . . substrate of force relations,"⁵ new historicists have offered up a series of non-literary texts and historical moments as proof that early modern literature was shaped by its relation to various forms and institutions of public power. While Foucault understands power as comprising sexuality and social discipline as well as state authority, however, new historicism tends to see power exclusively as a manifestation of royal prerogative. As Richard Halpern explains, for new historicists of the Renaissance "the predominant model of power is sovereignty, and . . . power is therefore given a juridico-political coding" in their

⁴(...continued)

view of new historicism's ideological roots see James Holstun, who characterizes the movement as non-Marxist ("Ranting at the New Historicism," *English Literary Renaissance* 19 [1989]: 189-225).

⁵Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley, 3 vols. (New York: Random House, 1978), 1:93.

work.⁶ This limited and limiting understanding of the sites and functions of power has resulted in a plethora of books and articles that trace the influence of court politics on early modern literature. What such studies obscure is the fact that for the majority of people living in early modern England issues of power were more likely to involve household relations of dominance and deference--that is, relationships between master and servant, husband and wife, parent and child--than they were to involve more abstruse class relations or courtly intrigue.

Alan Liu suspects that new historicism's questions about literature, history, and power are motivated not so much by curiosity about literary texts, or even about history, but rather by a "deep embarrassment" about the powerlessness of literary history. He goes on to argue that

the spurious, avant-garde novelty of the method . . . is really a rear-guard action spurred by the postmodern fear that in the face of history, literary history or any such mere show of intellect is passé.⁷

Whatever its motives, new historicism has certainly succeeded in limiting subsequent critical discussion about

⁶Richard Halpern, *The Poetics of Primitive Accumulation: English Renaissance Culture and the Genealogy of Capital* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 2-3.

⁷Alan Liu, "The Power of Formalism: The New Historicism," *English Literary History* 56.4 (1989): 722.

early modern drama to the particular series of issues suggested by its own restricted conception of power as the exercise of sovereign authority.

Picking up, I think, on this sense that contemporary criticism has grown preoccupied with its own potency (or lack thereof), Paul Yachnin has recently brought the focus to bear again on early modern literature. At the centre of Yachnin's post-new-historicist argument is the image of what he calls the "powerless" theatre of the late-Elizabethan and early-Jacobean period. Yachnin's critical challenge is twofold. His overt target is a specific misconception about the theatre's ability to create social and political anxiety at the turn of the seventeenth century. His more general implicit challenge is to late-twentieth-century critics who focus their discussions too narrowly on the machinations of state-controlled power. His fundamental claim is that the theatre of William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, and Thomas Middleton is best understood as separate from the operations of power in the political arena. Yachnin acknowledges that the idea that theatre exerted a strong affective force over its audience persisted throughout the Tudor and Stuart age. He argues, however, that this idea lost considerable currency between 1590 and 1625, when the theatre came

instead to be understood as "unable to influence its audience in any purposeful or determinate way."⁸

Yachnin is not alone in his attempts to move discussions of early modern literature beyond this limiting focus on the operations of sovereign authority. The work of Katherine Eisaman Maus and Lars Engle is also pushing early modern scholarship in this new direction. What interests me most about such arguments is their insistence that criticism of early modern literature move beyond an obsession with issues of juridico-political power, and their assertion that such a redefinition of power need not preclude an appreciation of the cultural work that literature does.⁹ Acknowledging theatre's lack of political agency is not, of course, the same as arguing that literature is powerless. As I argue throughout this dissertation, expanding our understanding of the operations of power to include the household--a domain necessarily banished from analyses concerned exclusively with power as a manifestation of state authority--enables a fuller understanding of theatre's historical significance and a greater sense of the dramatic text's ability to enrich our knowledge of the past, as well

⁸Paul Yachnin, *Stage-Wrights: Shakespeare, Jonson, Middleton, and the Making of Theatrical Value* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 2-3.

⁹See Katherine Eisaman Maus, *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Lars Engle, *Shakespearean Pragmatism: Market of His Time* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

as a more thorough appreciation for the role played by the domestic realm in creating a just and compassionate society.

I seek to challenge materialist criticisms narrowly preoccupied with public displays of sovereign power in part by arguing for the importance of a notion of moral agency to a sound reading of Shakespeare's plays. By this I mean that I want to insist on the value of situating the dramatic text not simply historically but also ethically. At the same time, I argue that a psychological criticism that seeks to impose a post-Enlightenment ideal of individual autonomy upon the early modern period is historically inaccurate; to presuppose a personal identity that exists prior to all social roles is to understand selfhood in Shakespeare's comedies anachronistically and thus to misread the plays. Instead I argue that the plays I consider here explore selfhood as the creation of a complex set of relationships that are best understood not as the product of impersonal ideological forces operating beyond the control of individual human agents, but as the imprecise, tentative, and mutable results of lived experience. In order to make sense of this experiential and relational conception of selfhood, we need to engage with the plays on a moral level.

In his introduction to the Oxford edition of *The Tempest*, Stephen Orgel argues that

relationships between men and women interest
Shakespeare intensely, but not, on the whole, as

husbands and wives. The wooing process tends to be . . . not so much a prelude to marriage and a family as a process of self-definition.¹⁰

It is precisely this kind of false dichotomy between the formation of individual identity (constructed by Orgel in characteristically Romantic terms as a predominantly solitary enterprise) and the process of building human relationships that I seek to challenge. In *The Tempest*, as in the other plays I will discuss, marriage and the forging of other relational ties within both the family and the broader community becomes a means to achieve self-understanding rather than an unfortunate distraction from this process. Indeed, negotiating quotidian relationships is presented in these plays as a central feature of the search for a rich and meaningful existence.

I. Domesticating the Political Economy

Recent criticism's tendency to understand the household merely as a cipher for ostensibly more powerful institutions like the state or the market finds forceful allies in the discourses of political philosophy and social history. From Aristotle's contention that the household relationships of mastery and servitude provided insufficient means and substance for a morally meaningful life, the invocation of

¹⁰Stephen Orgel, "Introduction" in *The Tempest*, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 56.

our shared social experience as members of households has most often resulted in the deflection of serious attention away from the domestic world and toward the state as the source of all meaningful forms of authority. Discussions of the relationship of forms of household association to other forms of civil society appeared in Western thought virtually without interruption through the end of the eighteenth century. They emerged in the nineteenth century as a central image of Marxian thought, and surfaced again in the late 1960s and early 1970s when, in very different ways, social historians like Peter Laslett, Gordon Schochet, and Lawrence Stone turned to an examination of the household as a kind of microcosm of society at large.

In *The Authoritarian Family and Political Attitudes in Seventeenth-Century England*, Schochet identifies three distinct strands in the historical and philosophical association of the household and political philosophy. First, he offers the teleology of Aristotle and the developmental speculations of Hobbes, Locke, and Hume as the primary examples of a view which understands the household as a precursory model of civil society. Next Schochet identifies a comparative process, associated with Plato and later Sir Robert Filmer, in which the powers of kings and fathers are considered identical. On this view, the difference between public and private spheres is collapsed and political power becomes the absolute and unquestioned

authority of the ruler. For a seventeenth-century patriarchalist and royalist like Filmer, the king's authority, like that of all fathers, is considered a direct legacy of God's original grant of dominion to Adam and therefore as natural, unlimited, and indisputable.¹¹

Third, Schochet argues, is the view that the family is an essential, if rudimentary, form of association that "fits into the larger scheme in so important a way as to deserve attention"--a view that he associates with the concentric universes of the great chain of being, and later Tillyard's *Elizabethan World Picture*.¹²

Schochet's architectonic of the relationship between household and state is notable for its insistence on the subordinate role played by the domestic realm in philosophical investigations of community-building; what each of these strands associating the household and the commonwealth share is a tendency to metaphorize the household itself out of existence. As an extension to Schochet's tripartite account, I want to posit the understanding of the household as a training ground of citizenship as another possible trajectory for the

¹¹Filmer's most famous opponent was John Locke, whose *Two Treatises of Government* was written as a direct challenge to Filmer's Adamite doctrine.

¹²Gordon Schochet, *The Authoritarian Family and Political Attitudes in Seventeenth-Century England: Patriarchalism in Political Thought* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1988), xiv.

relationship between *oikos* and *polis*. While Aristotle argues in both the *Ethics* and the *Politics* that the good life is predicated on active participation in public life, he also emphasizes that household relationships provide a necessary preparation for citizenship. The *oikos* itself may--on Aristotle's account--comprise a non-public, imperfectly rational sphere within which women, slaves, and children are subsumed and in which they are able to achieve only some lesser good, but this domestic world not only produces future citizens but also instructs them in the basics of social behaviour.¹³ While the metaphorical association of household and commonwealth appears to have dominated in Elizabethan and Jacobean England, this understanding of quotidian life as playing a constructive role in the formation of the commonwealth also found considerable support.

The interpretative link between the household and the commonwealth was particularly strong in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. If, as Mark Breitenberg has argued, "the family in the early modern period . . . was made to serve as an analogy for virtually all other relations in society,"¹⁴ foremost among these associative analogies was

¹³See Aristotle, *The Politics of Aristotle*, ed. and trans. Ernest Barker (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), Bk. I "The Theory of the Household," 1-87.

¹⁴Mark Breitenberg, *Anxious Masculinity in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 17-18.

that between the household and the state. Again and again preachers, pamphleteers, politicians, and philosophers described the household as a miniature commonwealth.¹⁵ In 1536, Thomas Cromwell's injunctions to the clergy included a reference to the heads of households as "rulers of their own family"¹⁶; in 1583 Thomas Smith called the household "a litle sparke resembling as it were that government"¹⁷; and a 1598 conduct book claimed that "A Householde is as it were a little common-wealth."¹⁸ This notion that the distribution of power in the patriarchal household should act as a model for that within the state received perhaps its most widely read formulation in French philosopher Jean Bodin's *The Six Books of the Commonwealth*, a text Constance Jordan has called the "the most formidable work on political thought" of the sixteenth century.¹⁹

¹⁵It is important to realize that early modern writers often fit more than one of these admittedly anachronistic categories.

¹⁶Quoted in Christopher Hill, *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England* (New York: Schocken, 1964), 446.

¹⁷Sir Thomas Smith, *De Republica Anglorum*, ed. Mary Dewar (1583; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 59.

¹⁸Robert Cleaver, *A Godly Form of Householde Government: for the ordering of private families....* (London, 1598), 1.

¹⁹Constance Jordan, *Renaissance Feminism: Literary Texts and Political Models* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 212n.

Wherefore as a familie well and wisely ordered, is the true image of a Citie, and the domesticall government, in sort like unto the soveraigntie in a Commonwealth: so also is the manner of the government of an house or familie, the true modell for the government of a Commonwealth.²⁰

This statement of the relationship between "domesticall government" and the right ordering of the commonwealth clearly emphasizes the centrality of political authority to the functioning of both household and state. This should not be construed, however, as an assertion of their identity. While later patriarchalists like Filmer explicitly identify the father's power with that of the ruler, Bodin's explication of political authority as the central feature of political economy constructs sovereignty (understood as a supreme, perpetual, and absolute political authority) as the unique prerogative of the state:

Besides that also such a communitie of al things is impossible, and incompassible [incompatible] with the right of families: for if in the familie and the citie, that which is proper, and that which is common, that which is publick, and that

²⁰Jean Bodin, *The Six Books of the Commonweale: a facsimile reprint of the English translation of 1606*, ed. Kenneth Douglas McRae (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 8.

which is privat, be counfounded; we shall have
neither familie nor yet Commonweale.²¹

On Bodin's account then, the household may act as a model for sovereignty, but sovereignty's public authority can never obtain in the domestic realm.

While philosophers like Bodin were formulating such general theoretical accounts of the correlation of the household to the state, James I of England and VI of Scotland was already deploying a conception of household power as homologous to state power to bolster his vision of an absolute monarchy whose authority was without limit.²² James declared that a divinely anointed king is a "naturall Father to all his Lieges" and that thus his control over them is total.²³

There was, however, a coexisting model of the relationship between the private and public worlds that understood the household not as a commonwealth in embryo, but as a training ground for citizenship. Consider the

²¹Bodin, *Six Books*, 11.

²²In fact, Bodin's treatise first appeared in France in 1576, just two years before James VI assumed control of the government of Scotland.

²³Quoted in Constance Jordan, "The Household and the State: Transformations in the Representation of an Analogy from Aristotle to James I," *Modern Language Quarterly* 54.3 (1993), 309. See also Jonathan Goldberg's discussion of James's use of the family as metaphor for royal prerogative in *James I and the Politics of Literature: Jonson, Shakespeare, Donne, and their Contemporaries* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983).

following excerpt from William Perkins, one of early modern England's most astute political commentators:

Upon this condition of the Familie, being the Seminarie of all other Societies, it followeth, that the holie and righteous government thereof, is a direct meane for the good ordering, both of Church and Common-wealth; yea that the lawes thereof being rightly informed and religiously observed, are available to prepare and dispose men to the keeping of order in other governments. . . . For this first Societie, is as it were the Schoole, wherein are taught and learned the principles of authoritie and subjection. And look as the Superiour that faileth in his private charge, will prove incapable of publike employment; so the Inferiour, who is not framed to a course of Oeconomical subjection, will hardly undergoe the yoke of civill obedience.²⁴

According to Perkins the central function of the household is educative. As the "[s]eminarie of all other Societies," the household prepares citizens for the relationships of domination and subjection that also exist in the public realm. For Perkins, the society that attempts to sever the private world from the public domain in which it is

²⁴William Perkins, *Christian Oeconomie*, trans. T. Pickering (London: E. Weaver, 1609), sig. 3r-3v.

necessarily embedded risks creating a society lacking both order and righteousness.

This conception of the household's preparative role is later echoed by William Gouge, author of one of England's best-selling conduct books:

A family is . . . a little Commonwealth . . . a school wherein the first principles of government and subjection are learned . . . So we may say of inferiors that cannot be subject in a family; they will hardly be brought to yield such subjection as they ought in Church or Commonwealth.²⁵

Gouge describes the household as an instructional institution that shapes individuals within a set of hierarchical social relations. Learning to operate within the limits of familial authority, he argues, teaches one to function within ecclesiastical and civil hierarchies. According to both Perkins and Gouge then, the family is more than simply a microcosm of, or a metaphor for, the state. Rather, the family is an important training ground for good citizens.

It is this notion of the household's cardinal role in the crucial process of forming the citizenry of a just state that, I argue, is explored in Shakespearean comedy. In the plays that I discuss here the ostensibly private educative

²⁵William Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties: Eight Treatises*, 3rd ed. (1622; London: Bladen/Haviland, 1634), 17.

processes of the household are presented as an intrinsic part of the wider public process of formulating ethical value at the level of the state. In other words, the responsibility of creating citizens also offers the household the opportunity to formulate value. Thus when Alice Ford and Margaret Page, as representatives of a distinctly domestic world, teach John Falstaff about acceptable behaviour, they are doing more than simply indoctrinating him with established social values; they are also asserting their own particular humanizing influence on both the rapacious knight and the community of Windsor as a whole.

Failing to make a distinction between homologous and preparative views of the relation between household and state, many critics seek to emphasize the disciplinary nature of the family's role in making subjection an acceptable part of life.²⁶ While I support the political aims that fuel these readings, finally such positions fail to ascribe adequate authority to the primary social, economic, and spiritual unit of early modern England. As Shakespearean comedy demonstrates, often rather poignantly, the formation of moral agents necessarily involves more than the inculcation of royally sanctioned hierarchical value. Learning to live in community inevitably entails learning to

²⁶I am thinking here of Mark Breitenberg's reading of William Gouge, for instance. See *Anxious Masculinity*, 17ff.

cope with power imbalance, but, as the comedies remind us, a valuable education is often more preoccupied with teaching self-discipline than it is with modelling rigid hierarchy.

Early modern England was certainly hierarchical, at both the domestic and civic levels. Law in the period gave the male head of the household control of the family's property and restricted most legal activities to men. Wives were expected to defer to their husbands' authority; servants were obligated to their masters and mistresses; children were expected to obey their parents. Nonetheless, women, servants, and children all played significant roles within the social order of the household, and Shakespearean comedy imaginatively figures ways in which their particular everyday experiences might be used to change their world.

II. Redeeming the Ordinary

My project here is to begin the process of "unmetaphoring" the early modern household. I borrow the notion of "unmetaphoring" from Rosalie L. Colie, who uses it to describe a process whereby conventional figurations transform themselves into "actual chosen behavior."²⁷ As I have already explained, current critical trends insist on reading beyond the familial details of Shakespearean comedies to their explorations of ostensibly more

²⁷Rosalie L. Colie, *The Resources of Kind: Genre-Theory in the Renaissance*, ed. Barbara K. Lewalski (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 118-19.

significant subjects such as law, economics, or foreign policy. In short, they read analysis of domestic politics as metaphorized appraisal of civic politics. In doing so, they risk downplaying the influential role of domesticity in early modern conceptions of identity, subjectivity, and community-building, and, more specifically, they risk undervaluing or even overlooking altogether contributions made by servants, women, and children. As an alternative, I am proposing to re-literalize the household--to read the mundane details of daily life that clutter Shakespeare's comedies as integral to the plays' commentary on matters of public concern.

My claim for the centrality of the household in the formulation of moral ideals and community values is grounded in the conviction that Shakespeare's comedies are best understood as responses to a larger cultural movement that sought to define a new, morally formative role for the mundane institution of the household. This new valuation of the household is a crucial aspect of what Charles Taylor has called the "affirmation of ordinary life" that characterizes the emergence of a distinctly modern sensibility.²⁸ A major strain in philosophical and theological thinking that developed throughout post-Reformation Europe, this challenge to an older tradition of civic humanism values quotidian

²⁸See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 211-302.

existence not as a means of naturalizing (and thereby defending) a hierarchical ontology, but as a potential site of moral goodness. It is this new way of thinking about ordinary life as a source of visions of the good life rather than merely as a means to survival to which I believe Shakespeare is responding in the plays I consider here. Rather than linking Shakespeare to a tradition that reads the domestic merely as a cipher for the state, I want to argue that the comedies are grounded in an investigation of the household itself as a locus for notions of moral value.

The doctrines of civic humanism understood life as a mere householder as necessarily inferior to one which also involved participation as a citizen. The process of accumulating the means of survival--that is, working for a living--was seen, following Aristotle, as a distraction from the search for a morally meaningful existence. Eating, sleeping, labouring, and child-rearing were constructed as essential, but finally transitory, activities properly divorced from civic and philosophical existence. As Taylor points out, there was even the sense that if the "means of mere life" loomed too large, they might endanger the good life.²⁹

²⁹Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 212.

That Shakespeare is interested in investigating the implications of this validation of what philosophers like Taylor, Stanley Cavell, and Hannah Arendt have all called "the everyday" is clear, I think, from the emphasis placed on the search for sources of morally sound visions of life within community in his plays.³⁰ Consider, for example, both the question posed by Hamlet in his final soliloquy and his Aristotelian answer: "What is a man, / If his chief good and market of his time / Be but to sleep and feed? a beast, no more" (IV.iv.33-35). As Hamlet's situation demonstrates, the citizen ethic is in some ways analogous to an aristocratic ethic of honour (born of hierarchical warrior societies) in which the active life of the honourable warrior/ruler is considered incommensurable with that of men of lesser rank whose only concern is their own survival.

As Shakespeare demonstrates so movingly in *Hamlet*, the distinction between ordinary life as the site of mere survival and the battlefield as the quintessential site of honourable existence upon which such an ethic is based threatens to collapse when warriors begin to battle over straw:

Sure He that made us with such large discourse,

³⁰See Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), and Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Garden City: Doubleday, Anchor Edition, 1959), and *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought* (London: Faber and Faber, 1954).

Looking before and after, gave us not
 That capability and godlike reason
 To fust in us unus'd. . . .

 Witness this army of such mass and charge,
 Led by a delicate and tender prince,
 Whose spirit with divine ambition puff'd
 Makes mouths at the invisible event,
 Exposing what is mortal and unsure
 To all that fortune, death, and danger dare,
 Even for an egg-shell. Rightly to be great
 Is not to stir without great argument,
 But greatly to find quarrel in a straw
 When honour's at the stake. How stand I then,
 That have a father kill'd, a mother stain'd,
 Excitements of my reason and my blood,
 And let all sleep, while to my shame I see
 The imminent death of twenty thousand men,
 That for a fantasy and trick of fame
 Go to their graves like beds.

(IV.iv.36-39, 47-62)

Even as he comes to the horrifying realization that
 Fortinbras is about to lead Norway into battle over a piece
 of Poland not large enough to bury the men who will die
 fighting over it, Hamlet experiences the tyranny of an
 honour ethic that demands he avenge his father's death with

Claudius's blood. The functionalist logic of the honour code dictates that the working life is a necessary but insufficient condition of the good life--what Hamlet calls the "chief good and market of his time." Both the dramatic irony and the pathos of his speech lie in our recognition that while a man preoccupied with gathering the bare essentials of survival may at first appear a beast, it is the warrior, seeking his "chief good" in military "tricks of fame," who takes the morally "bestial" action of risking his own and other lives for "an egg-shell."

If we follow Michael Bristol in reading Hamlet's soliloquies as "public oration" rather than "private rumination,"³¹ the tragedy of this paradox begins to exceed its personal (and even its dynastic) implications for the heir to the Danish throne. It becomes instead a more general commentary on the ethics governing ordinary life and public action. In the public sphere of the early modern stage the gap widens between the inefficacy of the household--where, in Hamlet's horrifying image, beds, like graves, trap men by some inescapable standard of inertia and inaction--and the terrible efficiency of the battlefield--where warriors cheapen human life by willingly trading men for vainglorious "fantasy." As Bristol points out, for the ghost of Hamlet's father "there is no real distinction

³¹Michael D. Bristol, *Big-Time Shakespeare* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 224.

between redress of private grievances and the enactment of public policy, and therefore no real question as to what is to be done."³² For early modern audiences themselves experiencing the impact of the transition from a feudal power structure to a pre-capitalist commercial economy, the implications of *Hamlet's* dramatization of negotiations about the goodness or badness of private behaviour and the morality of public policy were manifold. What *Hamlet's* words remind us, I think, is that the location of notions of the moral good were not fixed in early modern England any more than they were in *Hamlet's* distinctly pre-modern Denmark.

By identifying this shift toward the market economy and the effects that such a shift may have had on theatre-going Londoners, I do not mean to suggest that gradual renegotiations of the economic and political order are immediately recognizable to those who experience them. Rather, my claim is that like *Hamlet*, who experiences the confrontation of an outmoded honour ethic with a newer model of social relations as a series of personal crises of conscience, early modern audiences doubtless experienced the transition to this affirmative view of ordinary life as an imperceptible alteration in societal attitudes toward the value of everyday experience. As social historians like Christopher Hill, Ralph Houlbrooke, Lawrence Stone, and

³²Bristol, *Big-Time Shakespeare*, 224.

Keith Wrightson have all noted, the impetus of the Reformation--with its decisive move away from the medieval church's reliance on hierarchy, mediation, and a sacramental emphasis on the afterlife as the only possible site of true goodness--certainly had a resounding impact on the way that domestic life was being discussed across England throughout the end of the sixteenth and into the seventeenth century.

III. The Household in Civic Life

The philosophical emphasis on the here and now of lived experience that I have been discussing went hand-in-hand with a series of momentous social and economic transformations, many of which had a tremendous effect on the household and the family. As Barbara Hanawalt has demonstrated, the family had already proven itself a remarkably resilient institution, able to retain its basic structure despite the "cataclysmic changes" of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.³³ Now, as sixteenth-century England turned away from monasteries, feudal castles, and aristocratic great houses and sought instead to glorify the ordinary household, the average family began to assume an unprecedented importance. The impact of such sweeping sociological change was registered most obviously in changing attitudes towards the institution of marriage,

³³Barbara Hanawalt, *The Ties that Bound: Peasant Families in Medieval England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 3.

but it also affected perceptions of the household more generally.

In material terms, the household became the primary economic unit in England. The period following the dissolution of the monasteries and the decay of feudal fortresses in England saw an unprecedented amount of land fall into private ownership. This new availability of property, combined with a thriving merchant economy importing record numbers and varieties of goods, meant that many more people had access to the self-contained households that had once been the almost exclusive domain of the aristocratic classes.³⁴ In demographic terms, the household had become the dominant political institution of the period. More and more young people married, set up house, and began to see themselves not merely as individuals but as citizen householders and mistresses of households. A telling example of the socio-political primacy of the household in early modern England lies in accounts of the country's first census. When Gregory King made the first serious estimate of the population of England at the end of the seventeenth century, he took the household--not the individual--as his basic unit.³⁵

³⁴For a detailed exploration of these changes and their impact on early modern private spaces see Lena Cowen Orlin, *Private Matters and Public Culture in Post-Reformation England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994).

³⁵King's census was completed in 1696. See Hill, *Society and Puritanism*, 448.

This late-seventeenth-century bureaucratic recognition of the household community as the nation's primary social unit appears to constitute a late-blooming endorsement of the by-then-commonplace view that marriage and family life were essential for the health of society. Existence as a member of the commonwealth was assumed to entail certain civic obligations, and foremost among these was the responsibility to marry. As the foundation of both the family and the household, marriage was presented as a moral imperative and a political necessity in Tudor and Stuart England. Peter Laslett explains the significance of marriage for the community as a whole:

marriage, and particularly first marriage,
... was an act of profound importance to the
social structure. It meant the creation of a new
economic unit as well as of a lifelong association
of two persons previously separate and caught up
in existing families. It gave the man full
membership in the community and to the woman
something to run. . . . A cell was added to
society, in the town as well as in the country.³⁶

As Laslett's account of the communal value placed on heterosexual union stresses, marriage was understood not merely as a means of propagating the species and replicating

³⁶Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost: Further Explored*, 3rd ed. (London: Methuen, 1983), 101.

(and thereby expanding) the structures of civil society, but also as a way for both men and women to fulfil a moral responsibility to their commonwealth.

The most vocal proponents of this view are found among the Protestant clergy and pamphleteers of the period, but the notion that the moral obligations of the household were intimately connected to the well-being of the commonwealth was also popular enough to merit attention in the contemporary emblem collections that were popular throughout early modern Europe. "Not for our selves, alone wee are create, / But for our frendes, and for our countries good" begins the metrical illustration accompanying one of the emblems gathered for publication in 1586 by Geffrey Whitney. The poem continues:

And those, that are unto theire frendes ingrate,
And not regarde theire ofspringe, and theire blood,
Or hee, that wastes his substance till he begges,
Is like the henne, when shee hathe lay'de her egges,
That suckes them up and leaves the emptie shell,
Even so theire spoile, to theire reproche, and shame,
Undoeth theire heire, and quite decayeth theire
name.³⁷

³⁷Geffrey Whitney, *A Choice of Emblemes* (1586; Aldershot, Hants: Scolar Press, 1989), 64.

The emblem itself depicts a hen, observed by a curious cow and a rooster, eating her eggs in the forecourt of a small country barn or cottage (see figure 1). This grotesque domestic image is accompanied by the motto--"Quae ante pedes" or "The things before our feet." The emphasis here is clearly on the interrelation of everyday domestic obligations and civic responsibilities: the individual who fritters away his "substance" not only shames himself and his family, but also harms his "countrie." This sense that the householder must play a central role in safeguarding the public good by providing for "ofspringe" and by maintaining civil relations with "frendes," seemed to strengthen throughout the early modern period.

As the household gained currency as the primary socio-political unit of the period, it also began to assume an important ecclesiastical function. The books about the right ordering of households that proliferated at this time all stress the importance of the householder's role as a spiritual tutor to his family. One conduct book published near the turn of the seventeenth century, for example, introduces a collection of catechisms and instructions for teaching scripture in the household by reminding the reader that "it is a thing of necessitie, that such as keepe houses, should traine up their people comitted to their



Not for our selues, alone wee are create,
 But for our frendes, and for our countries good:
 And those, that are vnto theire frendes ingrate,
 And not regarde theire offpringe, and theire blood,
 Or hee, that wastes his substance till he begges,
 Or selles his landes, whiche seride his parentes well:
 Is like the henne, when shee hathe lay'de her egges,
 That suckes them vp and leaues the emptie shell,
 Euen so theire spoile, to theire reproche, and shame,
 Vndoeth their heire, and quite decayeth their name.

*Quisquis secundis rebus exultat nimis,
 Fluitq, luxu, semper insolita appetens,
 Hunc illa magna dura fortuna comes
 Subit libido: non placent sueta dapes,
 Non recta sani moris, aut vilius cibus: &c.*

Alutuum

figure 1

charge, in the knowledge of the Gospel."³⁸ Puritan Robert Cleaver also stresses religious education beyond the confines of church, advising masters of families to practice "at home catechising" of their servants and children, and holding them responsible for

the private instruction of them, and dealing with them in matters of religion, for the building of them up in true faith and for the inuring and bringing of them to a conscience toward God, that they may not only know and profess religion, but also feel and show the power of religion in their lives.³⁹

Margo Todd has argued persuasively that Protestant writers "of the hotter sort" should not be credited with single-handedly popularizing the doctrine of the family as the primary spiritual unit of society, since many of their arguments follow a rhetorical path already well-trodden by Christian humanist thinkers.⁴⁰ While I am claiming a connection between the emergence of a distinctly post-Reformation affirmation of everyday life and a model of the

³⁸Josias Nichols, *An Order of Household Instruction* (London, 1596), sig. Bv.

³⁹Cleaver, *A Godly Form of Householde Government*, 38, sig. A4r.

⁴⁰Margo Todd, *Christian Humanism and the Puritan Social Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 96. Todd's discussion of the spiritualized household challenges the orthodox view that the Reformation marked a watershed in attitudes towards marriage and the family (see 96-117).

household as a moral institution in later sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, I certainly do not mean to suggest that only Protestants understood the household as a moral space. In his 1633 *Partheneia Sacra*, for example, the Jesuit Henry Hawkins describes the material household as a moral extension of the man who builds it:

A House being a meer artificial, and no natural thing, hath its first subsistence in the Idea of Man's brayne; according to whose model, good or ill, the house so built, proves good or ill.⁴¹

In Hawkins's image the physical household is a product of the mind of its architect. As the moral weight carried by his use of the words "good" and "ill" suggests, for Hawkins a successful architect must also be a virtuous one. Hawkins leaves no doubt that he will be male. As Felicity Heal points out in her study of the shared and publicly articulated expectations regarding hospitality and domestic beneficence in early modern England, a sense of the domestic sphere as an ethical space was often articulated as an extension of the householder's own moral attributes; that is, as in Hawkins's account, the household's "moral and active qualities" were understood to emanate from the good behaviour of its master.⁴²

⁴¹Henry Hawkins, *Partheneia Sacra* (Paris, 1633), 166.

⁴²Felicity Heal, *Hospitality in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), 7. Heal identifies the notion of
(continued...)

In addition to being seen as an elaborate extension of its master's morality, the household was also supposed to be a site of domestic harmony and companionate bliss. I suggested earlier that the implications of the new emphasis on marriage affected men and women differently. I want to turn now to a consideration of the role of women in marriage and the household.

Despite the belief, widely held among non-specialists--and perpetuated in part, I suspect, by the enormous popularity of *Romeo and Juliet*--that women in the Renaissance were habitually married off against their will before they had "seen the change of fourteen years" (*Romeo and Juliet*, I.ii.9.), the average age at which Elizabethan women married was closer to twenty-three than to thirteen;⁴³ in addition, canon law stated that no marriage was valid without the consent of both spouses. Most contemporary conduct books also specify that the consent of both bride and groom was paramount if a marriage was to flourish. Robert Cleaver, for instance, lists "voluntary"

⁴²(...continued)
"keeping hospitality" as an essential ethical component of early modern notions of householding.

⁴³See Laslett, *World We Have Lost*, 39-91. Evidence gathered by Laslett and the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure suggests that the average age of marriage among men was twenty-six. See also the appendix to Ann Jennalie Cook's *Making a Match: Courtship in Shakespeare and his Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 265-67.

consent among the preconditions of marriage. "[W]e call this promise of marriage, voluntary," he explains,

because it must not come from the lippes alone,
but from the wel-liking and consent of the heart:
for if it be onely a verball promise, without any
wil at all, (and so meer hypocriticall and
dissembled) though it bindeth the partie that
promiseth.⁴⁴

Early seventeenth-century wedding sermons also present mutual love as an essential element of a successful marriage:

As for love, it is the life, the soule of
marriage, without which it is no more it selfe,
than a carcase is a man; yea, it is uncomfortable,
miserable, and a living death.⁴⁵

In another early seventeenth-century wedding sermon, the bishop of Salisbury describes marriage--"the society betwixt the husband and the wife, which as it is the roote and foundation of all the rest"--as a lifelong walk, and asks:

Can two or wil two walke together except they be
agreed? Will any two of you forr your selves to
converse & live together who have no accord or
agreement each with other? It is expedient to

⁴⁴Cleaver, *A Godly Form of Householde Government*, 120.

⁴⁵William Whately, *A Bride-Bush or A Wedding Sermon* (London, 1617), 67.

have company on the way, and there is comfort in it.

The bishop goes on to figure a voluntary and affectionate marriage as a kind of moral stronghold:

the foundations of marriage are to be laid accordingly, that affection truly and faithfully obtained on both parts may be thenceforth as an impregnable fortresse & castle never to bee conquered or overcome.⁴⁶

While contemporary Protestant theologians emphasized the role of companionate marriage in defending the household from external attacks, they also assumed that man's supremacy would regulate any internal conflict. Men and women were expected to offer comfort to one another, but man's natural superiority as ruler was assumed. William Perkins, for instance, argues that a wife's first duty is to "submit her selfe to her husband; and to acknowledge and reverence him as her head in all things." Perkins's account of a wife's second duty leaves no room for ambiguity:

The second dutie is, to be obedient unto her husband in all things; that is, wholly to depend upon him, both in judgement and will. For looke as the Church yields obedience to Christ her head, and yeelds her selfe to be commanded, governed,

⁴⁶Robert Abbot, *A Wedding Sermon Preached at Bentley in Darby-shire, upon Michaelmasse Day last past Anno Domini. 1607* (London, 1608), 43, 5, 62-63.

and directed by him, so ought the woman to the man.⁴⁷

Like Perkins, Stephen Gardiner assumes that women will be ruled by their husbands, and adds a modicum of religious obligation to the marital mix, when he argues that by submitting herself to her husband a woman proves her obedience to God:

For the wife being in subiection to her husband, the seruaunt to the master, and to whom soeuer ani man is in subiection, they must also obey their gouerners for gods sake.⁴⁸

Despite their repeated references to women's subordinate status--Paul's injunction to women to reverence and submit themselves to their husbands was a favourite scriptural authority for authors of early modern conduct books--many of these authors argued that women should be closely involved in household management. They also occasionally praised women's domestic contributions as socially constructive and meaningful work. Perkins, for example, highlights the importance of domestic matters and, despite his rigorous assertion of a wife's subordinate role in the household, argues that a good husband should share responsibility for domestic duties with his wife. According

⁴⁷Perkins, *Christian Oeconomie*, 130, 131-32.

⁴⁸Stephen Gardiner, *De Vera Obedientia* (1553; Leeds: Scolar Press, 1966), sig. Diiii.

to Perkins, a man "ought not in modestie to challenge the priviledge of prescribing and advertising his wife in al matters domesticall, but in some to leave her, to her owne will and judgement."⁴⁹ This notion that a woman might exercise her own "will and judgement" defines a particular authoritative role for wives, mothers, and mistresses of households.

Robert Cleaver, too, identifies women as capable of assuming household authority. Instead of excluding women from household responsibilities that he has already described as going far beyond the mere provision of food and shelter, for instance, Cleaver argues that women ought to be encouraged to participate in "handy busines, & houshold affaires."⁵⁰ William Gouge argues more specifically that for a good wife "a conscionable performance of household duties . . . may be accounted a publicke worke."⁵¹ Thus it is clear that distinctions between public and private were hardly absolute.⁵²

⁴⁹Perkins, *Christian Oeconomie*, 126.

⁵⁰Cleaver, *A Godly Form of Householde Government*, A4r-A4v, 159.

⁵¹Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties*, 18.

⁵²See Crawford, who challenges Jürgen Habermas's claim that by the mid-sixteenth century the public and the private were rigidly separated (with the private designating exclusion from the sphere of state apparatus) by noting that public and private in early modern England were "permeable concepts in thought and slippery concepts in practice" ("Public Duty," 57).

While women were occasionally able to assume more explicitly public roles through the practice of private conscience and religious faith,⁵³ it is clear that the household was the source for most women's contributions to community life. Marriage and the role of housewife entailed submission to a husband, but also provided women with a degree of membership in the public realm. As Ann Jennalie Cook points out, the status of full adulthood entailed by marriage was particularly important for a woman:

If wedlock placed her under a husband's authority, she at least exercised authority over her dwelling, her children, her servants. . . .

Before wedding, individuals were lesser citizens; afterwards, they were incorporated into society at a more responsible level.⁵⁴

Although single men could still exercise some measure of authority in the early modern equivalent of the public sphere, Peter Laslett notes that "[a]lmost no woman ever belonged to England as an individual, except it be a queen regnant--scarcely a woman in the ordinary sense--or a noble widow and heiress or two."⁵⁵ For women, the household

⁵³See Patricia Crawford, *Women and Religion in England, 1500-1720* (London: Routledge, 1993).

⁵⁴Cook, *Making a Match*, 8.

⁵⁵Laslett, *Worlds We Have Lost*, 19.

conferred an authority most often unavailable to those who elected not to marry.

My account of women's authority within the early modern household should not be read as an apologia for ministers and conduct book authors. Although they sometimes recognize the value to the wider community of women's work in the household, on the whole these men toe a deeply misogynist line that excludes women from the realm of public decision making. Despite the limitations imposed on them by such reductive cultural stereotypes of womanliness, however, truly remarkable women like Mary Sidney, Aemilia Lanyer, and Elizabeth Cary discovered and created new models for women's behaviour by exploring the domestic realm to which society had relegated them. Similarly, in the Shakespearean comedies to which I now turn, the female characters --distinctly ordinary fictional analogues of these historical aristocratic women--devise ways of turning everyday household life into meaningful participation in the construction of community values.

The comedies are populated by intelligent, witty, and creative women who insist on the importance to the broad community of their individual contributions. As I demonstrate in the following chapters, such contributions often take a recognizably mundane domestic form, but just as often they posit a less than conventional model of compliant womanliness. Toward the end of *The Winter's Tale*, for

instance, the play's old shepherd beholds his adoptive daughter dressed as queen of the sheep-shearing festival and is moved to remember past holidays presided over by his wife:

This day she was both pantler, butler, cook,
Both dame and servant; welcom'd all, serv'd all;
Would sing her song, and dance her turn; now here,
At upper end o' th' table, now i' th' middle;
On his shoulder, and his; her face o' fire
With labor, and the thing she took to quench it
She would to each one sip.

(IV.iv.56-62)

Here the mistress of the household plays every role from pantry servant to *chanteuse* to formal host, welcoming, serving, and dancing with her guests in turn. This domestic moment acts as a gentle reminder that the chaste, silent, and obedient Griselda was not the only cultural model of womanliness or wifeliness available in early modern England.

Chapter Two

The "Undividable Incorporate": Householding in *The Comedy of Errors*

The Comedy of Errors is perhaps Shakespeare's most explicit investigation of the competing roles of the household and the marketplace in constructions of self and community. The play traces the misidentifications and misunderstandings that result when a pair of identical twins (both named Antipholus) and their identical slaves (both named Dromio) end up in the same city after years of separation. While the play exploits fully the comic potential inherent in such an implausible state of affairs, at the same time it offers incisive commentary on the relationship between the domestic and the commercial sides of social existence. Antipholus of Ephesus is a well-connected member of the thriving Ephesian business community whose vision of the good life appears to consist in establishing and protecting his reputation as a successful merchant; although he is married, the affective relations of the household seem to exist for him only in so far as they enable his role in public life. Antipholus of Syracuse, on the other hand, is an unemployed bachelor and drifter who

dreams of belonging to a loving family, but whose solipsism leads him to fear the loss of independence entailed by participation in community life.

By literalizing the distinction between commercial and domestic identities in the figures of Antipholus of Ephesus and his twin, Antipholus of Syracuse, *The Comedy of Errors* insists not only that selves are shaped in meaningful ways by the network of social relationships in which they participate, but also more particularly that the affective relations of the household play an integral role in sustaining the civic and mercantile bonds of the city. The Antipholus brothers have been formed in different ways by their years of separation; as the action of the play moves to reunite them, the household--whose everyday activities are orchestrated by Adriana, wife of Antipholus of Ephesus, and her sister, Luciana--plays a pivotal role in urging the reconciliation of the competing claims of business and family that have kept the brothers apart. As events in Ephesus lead inexorably to the reunification of the Antipholi, efforts to sever the domestic domain from its public counterpart are exposed as futile, even potentially dangerous, and the household is revealed as both a necessary component of personal happiness and a fundamental constituent of a just and merciful state.

A brief introductory scene introduces the conflict between marketplace and household that propels events

throughout *The Comedy of Errors*. The play opens with the arrest of the Syracusan merchant Egeon by Solinus, duke of Ephesus, and his men. As the duke explains to his captive, travel between Syracuse and Ephesus has been declared illegal:

Merchant of Syracuse, plead no more.
 I am not partial to infringe our laws;
 The enmity and discord which of late
 Sprung from the rancorous outrage of your Duke
 To merchants, our well-dealing countrymen,
 Who, wanting guilders to redeem their lives,
 Have seal'd his rigorous statutes with their bloods,
 Excludes all pity from our threat'ning looks:
 For since the mortal and intestine jars
 'Twixt thy seditious countrymen and us,
 It hath in solemn synods been decreed,
 Both by the Syracusians and ourselves,
 To admit no traffic to our adverse towns.

(I.i.3-15)

The duke's language here is markedly oppositional. Clearly angered by the memory of Ephesian merchants sacrificed to ratify the Syracusan duke's harsh laws, Solinus uses words and images that are inflammatory, even violent: Egeon's countrymen are "seditious," Syracusan statutes are bloody, the quarrel between the two towns is "mortal." Solinus's speech also consistently places strong rhetorical and

metrical emphasis on the possessive pronouns "our," "your," "their," and "thy." For instance, the line proclaiming the duke's imperviousness to Egeon's pleas for mercy--pleas, incidentally, to which the audience has not been privy--ends with the emphatic spondee "no more." This metrical pattern is then echoed when Solinus makes recourse to Ephesian law to defend his arrest of Egeon: "I am not partial to infringe our laws," he announces, with stresses falling on both the direct object "laws" and the possessive pronoun "our." This pattern is repeated throughout the duke's speech as he emphasizes the phrases "your Duke," "their lives," and "their bloods." Such persistent spondaic punctuation of the regular iambic rhythm of the duke's speech accents both Solinus's insistence on the distinction between all things Syracusan and Ephesian and the play's larger thematic interest in notions of ownership and belonging.

The penalty for violation of the prohibition on travel between Syracuse and Ephesus, the duke continues, is either death or a substantial ransom:

Nay more, if any born at Ephesus be seen
At any Syracusan marts and fairs;
Again, if any Syracusan born
Come to the bay of Ephesus, he dies,
His goods confiscate to the Duke's dispose,

Unless a thousand marks be levied
To quit the penalty and to ransom him.

(I.i.16-22)

While the duke's words underscore the gravity of Egeon's situation, the financial particularities he discusses also highlight the commercial disagreement at the root of hostilities between Ephesus and neighbouring Syracuse. According to Solinus, the "enmity and discord" upon which the play opens is "sprung from the rancorous outrage" of the Syracusan duke toward a group of Ephesian merchants. Indeed, the duke's speech throughout this opening scene is peppered with specifically economic legalities. The "traffic" in "goods" between the "marts and fairs" of Ephesus and Syracuse is strictly prohibited; political strife has suspended ordinary business and Egeon must "quit the penalty" in order to "ransom" his life.

What begins as a tale of international economic intrigue is quickly domesticated, however. In a substitution that prefigures the influential role of the household later in the play, Egeon offers up not cold, hard currency but domestic narrative in a bid to save himself. Unable to pay his own ransom, Egeon instead recounts the story of his life to the duke and thereby shifts the forum for the play's investigation of such notions as ownership, belonging, and the formulation of community values from the political arena to the affective domain of the household.

From the start, Egeon's autobiographical tale is a family matter:

In Syracuse was I born, and wed
 Unto a woman . . .
 With her I liv'd in joy; our wealth increas'd
 By prosperous voyages I often made
 To Epidamium, till my factor's death,
 And the great care of goods at randon left,
 Drew me from kind embracements of my spouse;

(I.ii.36-43)

The focus of Egeon's tale is as intimate and domestic as Solinus's was public and commercial. The Syracusan merchant speaks fondly of his wife, reminiscing about the early days of their marriage and particularly about his spouse's "kind embracements." Despite its apparent strength, however, this marital bond proves no match for the pull of more public responsibilities. Leaving his wife behind, the young Egeon heads for Epidamium and unwittingly sets in motion events that ultimately lead to the violent rending of his household. Significantly, the marketplace appears as the primary agent of destruction in his dramatic account of a household brutally divided. Egeon insists that business trouble precipitated his fatefully protracted visit to Epidamium, and although he credits the "always-wind-obeying deep" (I.i.63) with causing the actual shipwreck that leaves his family "splitted in the midst" (103), he presents the

death of his agent, his "factor," as the initial cause of his departure from home. Like Solinus before him then, Egeon posits commercial strife as a direct threat to domestic peace.

The play clearly portrays the affective bonds of the household more sympathetically than the merciless (and potentially violent) commercial ties of the marketplace. Nevertheless, *The Comedy of Errors* insists that in Ephesus the domestic and mercantile realms are inextricably intertwined, locked in a mutual dependency capable of generating both pleasure and terror for residents and visitors alike. While the "joy" experienced by the young Egeon and his bride is clearly due, for instance, at least in part to the "prosperous voyages" undertaken by the Syracusan merchant, these same commercial ventures are just as clearly responsible for destroying that joy not long after. Similarly, while Solinus implies that trade between Syracuse and Ephesus has in the past provided the basis for strong international relations, the souring of these same mercantile ties also leads to bloodshed.

Both Egeon's heart-rending domestic drama and Solinus's politicized account of the immediate threat to the Syracusan merchant's life emphasize the ability of the marketplace to exceed the boundaries of its proper domain and to influence events in the private sphere of the household. Their exchange of stories upon the Ephesian mart also insists on

the household's ability to affect life in the public sphere; Egeon's tale of a young family first delighted by the arrival of healthy twin boys and then brutally wrenched apart so moves the duke that he allows the old merchant the rest of the day in which to gather his ransom.

Egeon disappears from the play after this initial storytelling sequence, but not before his exchange with Solinus has prepared audiences for the continuing battle between the realms of commerce and domesticity that gives the main plot its shape. Before I move to a fuller analysis of the tensions between marketplace and household in the play, and to a discussion of the competing discourses of selfhood to which the characters ascribe, however, I want to turn briefly to a consideration of the twentieth-century critical response to *The Comedy of Errors*.

I. "Oh dear, what can the matter be?"

Scholars have long shared a sense that the matter of *The Comedy of Errors* is unworthy of serious study, and many recent articles about the play begin with some account of its impoverished critical history. One such article quotes a number of "sober critics" of the 1940s who dismissed the play variously as "a clever specimen of prentice work," "an exercise in dramatic archeology," and a "pure comedy of

event."¹ Another critic opens her article on the play by explaining that "virtually every good critical introduction to *The Comedy of Errors* apologizes for the play."² Citing critics from the 1960s, she points out that the play has been dismissed as inconsequential because it was written early in his career by a Shakespeare "still without too much to say about love, politics, or human nature,"³ because it is held to be restrained by the limits of its farcical genre--a genre "that not even Shakespeare could extend beyond somewhat narrow limits,"⁴--and finally, because while its plot structure has been praised for its cleverness, its arguments have long been considered "primitive."⁵

At the root of such early evaluations of *The Comedy of Errors* lies the assumption that a play so involved in the

¹James L. Sanderson, in "Patience in *The Comedy of Errors*," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 16 (1975), 604 quotes J. Isaacs, quoted by E. C. Pettet, *Shakespeare and the Romance Tradition* (London: Staples Press, 1949), 68; Mark Van Doren, *Shakespeare* (New York: Doubleday, 1939), 33; Paul A. Jorgensen, ed., *The Comedy of Errors*, in *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. Alfred Harbage et al. (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969), 55.

²Barbara Freedman, "Egeon's Debt: Self-Division and Self-Redemption in *The Comedy of Errors*," *English Literary Renaissance* 10 (1980), 360.

³Jorgensen, "*The Comedy of Errors*," 55; quoted in Freedman, "Egeon's Debt," 360.

⁴Harold Brooks, "Themes and Structures," quoted in Freedman, 360.

⁵Freedman, "Egeon's Debt," 361.

minutiae of daily existence cannot possibly hold any interest for either scholars or discerning audience members. As C. L. Barber first observed, "There is more of daily, ordinary life in *The Comedy of Errors* than in any other of the comedies except *The Merry Wives of Windsor*."⁶ Indeed, the audience is deluged with domestic detail throughout the play. We hear that "a'Ve'n'sday last" Dromio of Ephesus was given sixpence to pay for repairs to Adriana's saddle (I.ii.55-56); that Adriana will serve capon and roast pig for dinner (I.ii.44); that the "kitchen wench" at the Phoenix is stout and has pimples (III.ii.109-11; 134-37). Despite its overt preoccupation with such prosaic matters, however, old and new critics alike have for the most part either ignored *The Comedy of Errors*'s concern with household life or dismissed its focus on the everyday as a conventional component of farce.

This devaluation of the ordinary as a subject of study continued even when later critics initiated a rediscovery of the play in the mid-1970s.⁷ Consider, for example, James L. Sanderson's attempt to recover *The Comedy of Errors* for serious study by emphasizing its interest in "substantial"

⁶C. L. Barber, "Shakespearian Comedy in *The Comedy of Errors*," *College English* 25 (1964), 493.

⁷I am not suggesting that this move to reclaim *The Comedy of Errors* for academe was a unified movement. Nevertheless, after a long period of virtual silence about the play, a number of articles discussing *The Comedy of Errors* appeared in the 1970s.

psychological issues. Asking us to smile over G. B. Harrison's assertion that the play is "more suited for a New Year's Eve party than for a conference of critics," Sanderson argues that "there is more substance to the play than the obvious noisy surface action." For Sanderson, what is at issue is a matter of genre and critical mode; Harrison pigeon-holed *The Comedy of Errors* as a farce and was therefore unable to recognize its "substance." Sanderson will read the play as a comedy and identify in the play "an important theme" that Shakespeare developed further in "a number of his later and greatest plays" and thereby rescue *The Comedy of Errors* from condemnation as a play lacking in "substance."⁸ While their approaches appear significantly different, both critics share a conviction that the farcical action of *The Comedy of Errors*--what Sanderson calls its "noisy surface action"--is immaterial. Sanderson believes that a critical excavation of the play will produce the literary shards--the ancestral remains--of the great themes of Shakespeare's really good plays. Harrison apparently believes that such a search is futile. They are agreed that nothing of interest exists on the surface of the play.

Many more recent commentators are also aware of the play's critical neglect and have attempted to rescue *The Comedy of Errors* from critical marginalization while at the same time presenting valid and useful challenges to now

⁸Sanderson, "Patience," 604.

outmoded forms of criticism.⁹ By pinpointing the limitations of a naive biographical approach to literary criticism that automatically elides an ostensibly self-made author with the characters and actions of his text, these contemporary critics draw attention to the liabilities of such an approach to reading both history and artistic production. Equally importantly, these critics identify the dangers of formalist New Critical readings whose emphasis on the autonomy of the literary work at the expense of an understanding of the historical and cultural conditions of its production assumed a universal and transhistorical aesthetic horizon (underpinned by an implicit moral framework) against which works of art could be measured.

Although such challenges to an earlier critical tradition signal both a recognition of some of the pitfalls into which previous generations of Shakespearean critics have fallen, and a tendency toward a healthy self-reflexiveness about the practice of literary criticism, recent critics of *The Comedy of Errors* have not always

⁹For more recent reevaluations of *Comedy of Errors*, see Gail Kern Paster, *The Idea of the City in the Age of Shakespeare* (Athens, University of Georgia P, 1985), 178-219, esp. 186-94; Russ McDonald, "Fear of Farce," in "Bad" *Shakespeare: Revaluations of the Shakespeare Canon*, ed. Maurice Charney, (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1988), 77-90; Douglas Bruster, *Drama and the Market in the Age of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 66-69; Camille Wells Slight, *Shakespeare's Comic Commonwealths* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 13-31; Douglas Lanier, "'Stigmatical in Making': The Material Character of *The Comedy of Errors*," *English Literary Renaissance* 23.1 (1993): 81-112.

managed to avoid reproducing--or in some sense imitating--the errors for which they ridicule their predecessors. This critical duplication stems, I want to argue, from a continuing failure on the part of a majority of critics to recognize that the household is presented as a locus of the good life in the play rather than as merely a domestic backdrop to the business of Ephesian life.

While some critics continue to de-emphasize the play's domestic elements in favour of its commercial or legal facets, others have begun to recognize the importance of the mundane to *The Comedy of Errors* and have initiated explorations of the prosaic matters that are the central focus of the action in Ephesus. Earlier thematic and psychological approaches proved uninterested in or oblivious to the domestic substance of *The Comedy of Errors*, but more recently materialist criticism's attention to physical detail has provided a theoretical model for reclaiming the prosaic events of the play as crucial evidence of its preoccupation with the means and matter of ordinary life. Joseph Candido's article on the symbolic centrality of food in Ephesus, for instance, works to situate the play firmly within a social milieu in which mealtimes operate as markers of accepted moral, spiritual, and social behaviour.¹⁰ Camille Wells Slight and Gail Kern Paster have also noted

¹⁰Joseph Candido, "Dining Out in Ephesus: Food in *The Comedy of Errors*," *Studies in English Literature* 30 (1990): 217-41.

the importance of social and familial bonds in the play.¹¹

I want to emphasize the extent to which the play's focus on day-to-day life is essential to its investigation of the constitutive features of selfhood.

The Comedy of Errors explores how its characters are defined with reference to the wider communities in which they live and work. Rather than dismissing the household as an inevitable and uncomplicated auxiliary of the marketplace, the play insists that the affective bonds of the domestic realm must compete with the commercial ties of the city for acknowledgement as a meaningfully constituent force in the community. A full reading of the play must recognize this interest in the interrelation of private and public life and resist pressures to understand the household merely as a metonymic figure for the marketplace or the state rather than as an institution itself worthy of scrutiny. Although *The Comedy of Errors* has sophisticated commentary to offer about the world of commercial exchange, these matters of public concern are presented as inextricably tied to the domain of the household. Most of

¹¹My own reading of *The Comedy of Errors* owes much to the work of both Slights and Paster, although their understandings of the function of social bonds in the play are rather different. While Slights argues that in Ephesus personal identity and social role are synonymous, Paster contends that the play depicts the menacing impact that a world dominated by an excess of social relationships has on the characters' sense of identity. See Slights, *Shakespeare's Comic Commonwealths* and Paster, *The Idea of the City*.

the economic matters referred to throughout the play are associated with some aspect of household maintenance, either physical (Dromio pays for repairs to Adriana's crupper) or emotional (Antipholus of Ephesus buys a promised golden chain for his wife). To ignore the dramatic tensions produced by the interdependence of household and marketplace by down-playing the play's attention to the minutiae of home-life is thus to seriously misread it.

Rather than turning a deaf ear to the "noisy surface action" of *The Comedy of Errors*, then, I want to read the domestic din generated by both the resident Ephesians and their Syracusan visitors as a central feature of the play's exploration of the role of the household in the formation of both individual selves and their wider communities. I begin in the following section with a comparison of the Antipholus brothers, and with a discussion of their respective responses to the competing pressures of domestic and commercial life.

II. Home Sweet Home

I have already suggested that the household is portrayed more sympathetically than the marketplace throughout *The Comedy of Errors*. The primacy of the domestic domain as the source of affective bonds that enable both individual happiness and collective justice is literalized in the play's formal setting; the household

assumes pride of place at the physical centre of Ephesus. Following classical precedence, Shakespeare's Plautine adaptation is set before three stylized dwellings. Sandwiched between a brothel and a priory, the house of Antipholus of Ephesus and his family is the focus of most of the play's dramatic action. Bearing the sign of the mythical Phoenix, the household pairs its material centrality with a quasi-mystical power to draw into its sphere of influence even hard-headed representatives of Ephesus's business community like Balthazar the merchant, Angelo the goldsmith, Pinch the doctor, and the Porpentine's nameless courtesan. Like many households in Shakespearean comedy, the Phoenix seems to exert an almost magnetic force even on those only remotely connected to its family matters. In the Padua of *The Taming of the Shrew*, for instance, commercial life is subsumed almost completely into the social, emotional, and financial transactions surrounding the marriages of Katherina and Bianca; visitors to the city quickly become indistinguishable from its residents as everyone is drawn to converge on the Minola living room to woo Baptista's daughters. In *The Comedy of Errors*, however, the action takes place both literally and figuratively out-of-doors, as the characters gather on the mart before the Phoenix and expose both their domestic and commercial concerns to public view. Rather than being silently elided, the domains of the household and the marketplace are in

constant tension, and the pull exerted by the household in Shakespeare's fictionalized Ephesus works to delimit social identity even as it effaces difference in a series of comic confusions.

And there are plenty of comic confusions in Ephesus. By doubling the single set of identical twins he found in Plautus's *Menaechmi*, one of his Latin sources,¹² Shakespeare immediately doubles the potential for comic confusion in his own play. As René Girard has pointed out, however, the mere presence of indistinguishable twins (no matter how many) is insufficient to generate comedy; instead, he argues, the characters' "stubborn expectation of difference in the face of non-difference" is what produces hilarity in the play.¹³ Girard is surely right to insist that many of the play's comedic moments are generated by the characters' persistent refusal to acknowledge the possible

¹²It is widely accepted that Plautus's comedies *Menaechmi* and *Amphitruo* served as sources for *The Comedy of Errors*. These Roman plays in turn owe a debt to the Greek New Comedy of Menander (c.342-292 BC) and his contemporaries which features plots based on contemporary life and deals most often with the vicissitudes of young lovers caught up among such stock characters as the miserly father, the shrewish wife, the boastful soldier, and the clever servant. For a full discussion of the play's sources see R. A. Foakes's "Introduction" to *The Comedy of Errors*, The Arden Shakespeare, 5th ed. (London: Methuen, 1962), xxiv-xxxiv and T. W. Baldwin, *On the Compositional Genetics of The Comedy of Errors* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965).

¹³René Girard, "Comedies Of Errors: Plautus-Shakespeare-Molière" in *American Criticism in the Poststructuralist Age*, ed. Ira Konisberg (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1981), 69.

existence of human beings "less different from each other than we would like them to be."¹⁴ I want to suggest, however, that the comedy of Shakespeare's play arises more explicitly from the unwillingness of its central male characters to abandon a fantasy of unqualified autonomy. Although they are different in temperament and have had varied life experiences, the Antipholus brothers share a persistent belief in their respective abilities to function independent of the affective relations of the household. Antipholus of Ephesus's attention is clearly directed toward the public side of his existence; he expects his wife to entertain his business acquaintances but speaks harshly both of and to her, and exhibits demonstrably little pleasure in fulfilling his domestic responsibilities. Consider, for instance, his words to the goldsmith Angelo as the two men prepare to descend unannounced and tardy upon Adriana's dinner-table:

Good Signior Angelo, you must excuse us all,
 My wife is shrewish when I keep not hours:
 Say that I linger'd with you at your shop
 To see the making of her carcanet,
 And that to-morrow you will bring it home.

(III.i.1-5)

Rather than sending word of some unavoidable delay and warning Adriana of his plan to bring guests home to share

¹⁴Girard, "Comedies of Errors," 69.

their midday meal, Antipholus instead slanders her publicly by labelling her "shrewish" and then readies a lie to account for his tardiness. The merchant's lack of respect for his wife and her domestic affairs is again evident when his first words upon her hearing her voice are a peevish scolding: "Are you there, wife? You might have come before" (III.i.63). Antipholus has a habit of taking the comforts of his household for granted--when he can be bothered to enjoy them at all. Nevertheless, he is surprised and appalled when his domestic problems begin to affect his work.

Unlike Antipholus of Ephesus who forsakes his domestic relationships for the commercial pleasures of the marketplace in the mistaken belief that the private and public sides of social existence can be isolated one from the other, Antipholus of Syracuse actively seeks out a network of affective relations by searching for his mother and brother. He too seems to resent, however, that membership in family and community is necessarily predicated on the acceptance of adult responsibilities that restrict individual freedoms. The more philosophical of the twins, Antipholus of Syracuse is plagued not by the practical expectations generated by marriage, but by the more esoteric fear that finding his family may cause him to lose his sense of himself as a distinct and unfettered agent. Although the specifics of their concerns appear antithetical, the twins

share a fundamental refusal to acknowledge that the affective relationships of the household upon which they are ultimately so dependent demand by their very nature a degree of self-renunciation. Instead of drawing strength from what Gail Kern Paster terms the "radical connectedness of social experience,"¹⁵ the Antipholus brothers each spend the better part of five acts desperately proclaiming the virtue of self-reliance while trying to shield themselves from the transformative powers of the household.

Despite Egeon and Aemilia's odd decision to use the same name for twin sons who are so alike that they can be "distinguish'd but by names" (I.i.52), then, we have little trouble telling one Antipholus brother from the other. Antipholus of Ephesus is the consummate insider, an established home-owner and popular businessman connected to Ephesian society through a network of domestic and commercial relationships. Antipholus of Syracuse, on the other hand, is presented as both a civic and an emotional outsider; with neither sovereign nor family to vouch for him in Ephesus, he is rendered both "Hopeless and helpless" (I.i.157) by his homeless state.

* * *

When the teenage Antipholus of Syracuse leaves home on a quest to find the brother he has lost in infancy, he is also searching for a sense of himself as a participant in a

¹⁵Paster, *The Idea of the City*, 187.

wider community. He is trying, in the vernacular of a later age, to find himself. Both the comedy and the errors of Shakespeare's play result not from the failure of Antipholus's mission, but from its astonishing success. While it appears at first as though the unfortunate Antipholus will, like his father before him, discover not kin but cruelty on the hostile shores of Ephesus, he instead finds himself at the very centre of a tumultuous domestic world. An Ephesian merchant has warned him of the danger awaiting Syracusans discovered in Ephesus, and Antipholus knows that one of his countrymen is slated to die for the crime of setting foot on its shores. Instead of facing the executioner, however, Antipholus eventually finds himself dining in the home of a woman who claims to be his wife. The series of mistakes that culminates in this strange meal is initiated by a scene in which Antipholus mistakes his brother's slave for his own bondman.

Thinking that he sees his long-time companion Dromio rushing towards him down the mart, Antipholus calls out a friendly query:

S. Ant. . . . How chance thou art return'd so soon?

E. Dro. Return'd so soon! rather approach'd too late:
The capon burns, the pig falls from the spit;
The clock hath stricken twelve upon the bell:
My mistress made it one upon my cheek:
She is so hot, because the meat is cold:

The meat is cold, because you come not home:
 You come not home, because you have no
 stomach:

You have no stomach, having broke your fast:
 But we that know what 'tis to fast and pray,
 Are penitent for your default to-day.

(I.ii.42-52)

Mistaking Antipholus of Syracuse for his Ephesian twin, a breathless Dromio of Ephesus calls the man he believes to be his master home for his midday meal. Dromio's clipped and repetitive speech provides a sharply detailed and remarkably complete picture of life at the Phoenix: lunch is served at twelve o'clock, the menu consists of capon and roast pig, meal preparations are being presided over by the mistress of the household, and this mistress is infuriated by her husband's tardiness. Ironically, rather than corroborating Antipholus's marginal identity as a homeless stranger, Dromio--the man he calls the "the almanac of my true date" (I.ii.41)--transforms him into the perfect Ephesian family man. Antipholus has suddenly become the master not of one servant and a single bag of gold, but of an entire household, complete with a wife, a sister-in-law, and an obligation to return home in time for meals. Primed to expect aggression in Ephesus, he is wholly unprepared for such a domestic onslaught.

While his unexpected luncheon invitation unsettles Antipholus, it must also seem like an extraordinary instance of wish-fulfilment. His appearance in Ephesus has been marked by a profound sense of alienation. Having failed to secure a dinner appointment with the helpful merchant who greets him upon his arrival, Antipholus, "dull with care and melancholy," plans to wallow in his feelings of exclusion by roaming, unnoticed, amid the hustle and bustle of the mart: "I will go lose myself, / And wander up and down to view the city," he tells Dromio (I.ii.20; 30-31). Instead, the young Syracusan wanderer finds himself living out a childhood dream in which the game of "playing house" is instantly made real. A home and a family--those socio-economic markers of adulthood and civic responsibility--suddenly become his for the taking without his having to work for them.

Early modern audience members would surely have appreciated the attractions of this adolescent fantasy in which the respectability conferred by marriage and householding seems to appear unbidden out of the mist. In late-sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century England most young people had to work for a number of years before they had accumulated the financial means that would allow them to inaugurate their own households and thus to participate in society as full-fledged adult members.¹⁶ Indeed, if

¹⁶This period of education and socialization outside the original family home extended to both men and women, and
(continued...)

contemporary conduct books are any indication, there was an almost universal need for young men like Antipholus to leave home in order to earn money and gain work experience before they married and set up house. Like Antipholus, who arrives in Ephesus with only a bag of gold and a head full of stories about a "town full of cozenage" (I.ii.97; cf.1-8), these young men left their childhood towns for the greater economic opportunities afforded by London and regularly arrived in the city with great expectations, some trepidation, and few connections.

A fictionalized dialogue published less than twenty years before *The Comedy of Errors* was written details the various kinds of work available to able-bodied men in Elizabethan London, and includes practical information for prospective employees about securing employment, behaviour appropriate to an apprentice, and safe neighbourhoods to live in the city.¹⁷ This brief pamphlet purports to reproduce a conversation between an eighteen-year-old country lad named Puer and a former London servant called

¹⁶(...continued)
to members of all social classes. Depending on their sex and social station, young people worked, for example, as servants, farmhands, apprentices, pupils, ladies-in-waiting, or pages. Ann Kussmaul estimates that as much as sixty percent of the population aged fifteen to twenty-four was in service at any given time during this period (*Servants in Husbandry in Early Modern England* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981], 3).

¹⁷John Fit John. *A diamonde most precious, worthy to be marked: instructing all maysters and servantes, how they ought to leade their lyves...* 1577.

Civis. As these stock Latin descriptors remind readers, entering into service and establishing an independent household of one's own were more than simply stages in the passage to adulthood; they also marked the transition from the political exclusion of childhood to the public recognition of citizenship. Like Puer, Antipholus of Syracuse is eager to complete the journey from boyhood to citizenship and to establish himself in a wider civic community. But while Puer's admission to London is predicated on his ability to prove himself as a responsible and contributing member of society, Antipholus is handed the role of wealthy Ephesian householder on a dinner platter.

Antipholus has doubtless dreamed of playing the part of the prodigal in a benign scene of familial reunion, but the force and speed with which he is absorbed into the chaotic domestic world of Ephesus surely exceeds even his most outrageous imaginings. Indeed, the spectre of a demanding household complete with bossy servant and indignant wife plays in unpleasant ways on the young man's fears regarding the search for his mother and brother and regarding the impact that finding them might have on his sense of individuality. While Antipholus appears starved for human companionship, he is also wary of reunification with his family. Left alone on the mart upon his arrival in Ephesus, Antipholus reflects on the nature of his pilgrimage. As he soliloquizes on his status as exile, he ponders both the

rewards and the potential risks involved in seeking out familial bonds:

I to the world am like a drop of water,
That in the ocean seeks another drop,
Who, falling there to find his fellow forth
(Unseen, inquisitive), confounds himself.
So I, to find a mother and a brother,
In quest of them (unhappy), ah, lose myself.

(I.ii.35-40)

Antipholus's rather self-indulgent sentimentalism turns on his use of the word "confound." According to the *OED*, to confound is "to defeat utterly; to put to shame; to throw into confusion or disorder; to mix or mingle so that elements become difficult to distinguish or impossible to separate; to mix up an idea, erroneously regard or treat as identical."¹⁸ Each of these meanings resonates here as Antipholus experiences both the disorientation and uneasiness that come from being a homeless fugitive in a hostile land, and the anxiety that thoughts of being reunited with his family bring. The young Syracusan envisions himself tumbling unchecked, "like a drop of water," through an ocean of undifferentiated humanity. His fears are manifold; foremost among them is the dread that his attempt to contact "a mother and a brother" will fail and that he will find himself absorbed into the seemingly

¹⁸*OED*, 2nd ed., s.v. "confound."

infinite expanse of humanity that surrounds him, his individuality drowned in a community rendered terrifying by its lack of affective connections.

But of course Antipholus's particular situation puts a new spin on the otherwise rather conventional fear of being lost in the crowd, since as an identical twin he has as much to fear from success as he does from failure. As the *OED* reminds us, to be confounded is not simply to be defeated and shamed but also to be "erroneously . . . treat[ed] as identical." As this particular valence indicates, the search for a brother from whom he is, according to their father, indistinguishable, poses a literal as well as a metaphoric threat to Antipholus. The surfeit of welcome with which Antipholus is greeted in Ephesus is thus comic and horrific at the same time. The audience, primed by Egeon's tale of separated twins is, of course, aware that the Syracusan's search for his brother is at an end. Antipholus himself, however, is faced with a terrifying literalization of his twinned desires to find and to lose himself in Ephesus. "There's not a man I meet but doth salute me," he reports anxiously,

As if I were their well-acquainted friend,
And every one doth call me by my name:
Some tender money to me, some invite me;
Some other give me thanks for kindnesses;
Some offer me commodities to buy.

Even now a tailor call'd me in his shop,
 And show'd me silks that he had bought for me,
 And therewithal took measure of my body.
 Sure there are but imaginary wiles,
 And Lapland sorcerers inhabit here.

(IV.iii.1-11)

Rather than taking his measure as a Syracusan, Ephesus greets its visitor with remarkable intimacy, calling him by name, offering him gifts, handling even his body with an easy familiarity. For Antipholus this land of plenty represents not opportunity but evil, a place possessed by spirits and sorcerers.

As R. A. Foakes explains in his introduction to the Arden edition of the play, the New Testament associates the city of Ephesus not only with St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians and its admonishments regarding Christian marriage, but also with sorcery.¹⁹ Acts 19 recounts Paul's visit to Ephesus and identifies the city with "exorcists" and "curious arts,"²⁰ a passage that lends scriptural

¹⁹R. A. Foakes, "Introduction," to *The Comedy of Errors*, The Arden Shakespeare (1962; reprint, London: Methuen and Company, 1969), xxix.

²⁰The relevant passages read as follows: "Then certain of the vagabond Jews, exorcists, took upon them to call over them which had evil spirits the name of the Lord Jesus, saying, We adjure you by Jesus whom Paul preacheth"; "Many of them also which used curious arts brought their books together, and burned them before all men: and they counted the price of them, and found it fifty thousand pieces of silver" (Acts 19:13, 19).

authority to Antipholus's fears of being set upon by a legion of supernatural predators:

They say this town is full of cozenage:
As nimble jugglers that deceive the eye,
Dark-working sorcerers that change the mind,
Soul-killing witches that deform the body,
Disguised cheaters, prating mountebanks,
And many such-like liberties of sin:

(I.ii.97-102)

A single day of wandering about the Ephesian marketplace leaves the visiting Syracusan afraid either that he is about to be set upon by an assortment of mundane rogues (including "jugglers," "cheaters," and "mountebanks") or that he will be driven out of his mind by an array of otherworldly villains ("Lapland sorcerers," "dark-working sorcerers," and "soul-killing witches"). Never suspecting that the apparently magical effects that he encounters are the result of a perfectly ordinary case of mistaken identity, Antipholus experiences his absorption into Ephesian life as a direct challenge to his sanity: "Am I in earth, in heaven, or in hell? / Sleeping or waking, mad or well-advis'd?" he wonders (II.ii.212-13).

If the young Syracusan's appearance in Ephesus provokes an excessive welcome that is both marvellous and terrifying for him, his arrival has unambiguously unpleasant repercussions for his twin. Upon returning home to the

Phoenix after delaying in the marketplace, Antipholus of Ephesus discovers that he is barred from his own house while an imposter dines inside with his wife. The merchant's astonishment at finding his own door locked against him produces an uncharacteristically plaintive whine:

But soft, my door is lock'd . . . Who talks within there? Ho, open the door! . . . Wherefore? For my dinner: I have not din'd to-day . . . What art thou that keep'st me out from the house I owe? Do you hear, you minion? You'll let us in, I hope?

(III.i.30-54)

Antipholus's plaintiveness soon turns to fury, but not before he has revealed a bafflement edged with terror that comes of being denied access to his home. As Antipholus's primal response to his barred door reminds us, the household is a primary source of both shelter and sustenance. "I have not din'd to-day," he cries, unable for a moment to believe that his main meal of the day is to be withheld. Dromio's comments also emphasize the importance of the household as source of food and of protection from the elements. "Your cake here is warm within," he tells Antipholus, "you stand here in the cold" (III.i.71).

Dromio's rather impudent intervention is particularly jarring because it constitutes such an abrupt shift from the polite patter his master and Balthazar have been engaged in while en route to dinner:

E. Ant. Y' are sad, Signior Balthazar, pray God our
cheer

May answer my good will and your good welcome
here.

Balth. I hold your dainties cheap, sir, and your
welcome dear.

E. Ant. O, Signior Balthazar, either at flesh or
fish,
A table full of welcome makes scarce one
dainty dish.

Balth. Good meat, sir, is common; that every churl
affords.

E. Ant. And welcome more common, for that's nothing
but words.

Balth. Small cheer and great welcome makes a merry
feast.

E. Ant. Ay, to a niggardly host and more sparing
guest:

But though my cates be mean, take them in
good part;

Better cheer may you have, but not with
better heart.

(III.i.19-29)

Harking back to the play's Plautine sources, this scene employs the easy rhythm of rhyming couplets to evoke a mood of relaxed geniality. Antipholus and Balthazar engage in

witty banter about social niceties and their dialogue is characterized by a stylish one-upmanship. As Candido has noted, dinner is presented as "an exclusively male concern, an occasion for refined humanist discourse on the relationship of food to friendship."²¹ This urbane and masculinized exchange of courtesies is disrupted, however, by the discovery that the gates of the Phoenix have been barred against them and by Dromio's appeal to the various female servants of the household--"Maud, Bridget, Marian, Cic'ly, Gillian, Ginn!" (31)--to open them again. What follows is a comically domesticated echo of the elegant repartee between Antipholus and Balthazar:

S. Dro. Mome, malt-horse, capon, coxcomb, idiot,
patch!

Either get thee from the door, or sit down at
the hatch;

Dost thou conjure for wenches, that thou
call'st for such store,

When one is one too many? Go get thee from
the door.

E. Dro. What patch is made our porter? My master
stays in the street.

S. Dro. Let him walk from whence he came, lest he
catch cold on 's feet.

(III.i.32-37)

²¹Candido, "Dining Out," 228 (Candido's emphasis).

Instead of refined discourse, Antipholus's friends witness a crude exchange of insults. Rather than being welcomed in "good part" with "better heart" Antipholus and his colleagues are left standing in the "street" catching cold on their "feet." Parodying the highly ritualized badinage of Antipholus and Balthazar, the earthy exchange between the two Dromios as well as later interventions by Adriana and her servant Luce render the domestic perspective banished from Antipholus's original account of dinner.

Infuriated by his inability to extend the appropriate hospitality to his business partners, Antipholus decides to exert his dominion over his insolent household through a show of brute force. His plan: to break down the gate and enter his home no matter who tries to stop him. The merchant's indignation has not deafened him to words of reason, however. When Balthazar argues that breaking down doors will do his "yet ungalled estimation" (102) no good, Antipholus is quick to agree and even swifter to propose that they try their luck at the home of the local courtesan instead. Despite Balthazar's aphoristically prescient account of falsity's squatter habits--"slander lives upon succession, / For ever hous'd where it gets possession" (105-106)--Antipholus seems convinced that this apparent violation of his personal property will be short-lived and that it can pose him no real threat. Falling back on what he assumes is his unassailable reputation as a successful

merchant, Antipholus literalizes his defection from the domestic realm by abandoning his attempts to enter his house and leading his guests to the Porpentine. "I know a wench of excellent discourse," he tells his companions, "Pretty and witty; wild, and yet, too, gentle; / There will we dine. This woman that I mean, / My wife . . . hath oftentimes upbraided me withal" (III.i.109-13). Evoking Dromio of Ephesus's earlier suggestion that his master has been known to satisfy his appetite elsewhere (I.ii.49-52), Antipholus's words reminds us that this is only the latest in what is apparently a long list of defections from the domestic realm.

Although he quickly reconciles himself to what he understands as proof of his wife's shrewishness and returns to the mart refusing to have his good time derailed by domestic troubles, Antipholus soon discovers that the household is not so easily divorced from the world of the marketplace. As soon as he emerges from dinner at the Porpentine, he begins to experience the impact that neglect of his household can have upon his business. All of a sudden a merchant who has waited since Pentecost for payment seeks to collect on a debt, the goldsmith from whom he has ordered a chain claims to have remitted it to him already, and Antipholus finds himself arrested for attempted robbery. Antipholus, a merchant "[o]f very reverent reputation, . . . / Of credit infinite, highly belov'd, / Second to none that

lives here in the city" (V.i.5-7) has suddenly become a man of "notorious shame" (IV.i.84).

As the precipitous downturn in Antipholus's fortunes emphasizes, the household is more than simply a source of subsistence. The *oikos* is also the emotional and moral foundation upon which both *agora* and *polis* are built in Ephesus. A man's public participation in Ephesian mercantile and civic life depends upon his role as master of a household. Having abdicated his responsibilities in the domestic realm, Antipholus finds himself alienated from the public realm as well.

Social dynamics in Ephesus begin to resemble a game of teeter-totter as the visiting Antipholus slips into the role of master of the household at the Phoenix and the resident Antipholus finds his position as respected merchant mysteriously compromised. When Antipholus of Syracuse arrives in Ephesus he causes (though he cannot see) his brother's sickening fall to earth. Unable to provide the hospitality that is an important part of doing business in his town, and surrounded on all sides by angry creditors, Antipholus of Ephesus discovers that his good name--his most valuable commodity--is not worth enough to ransom a piece of jewellery. Meanwhile, Antipholus of Syracuse has unwittingly assumed both his brother's domestic and commercial identities.

* * *

Toward the end of the play, just before the climactic moment at which the Antipholus twins and their matched pair of servant Dromios finally meet face to face, Egeon is led on stage by Duke Solinus and his officers. And, as it was in the first scene of the play, Egeon's death sentence is temporarily commuted, this time thanks to the clamorous citizens of Ephesus. As he tries to make his way to the site of Egeon's execution, Solinus finds himself surrounded by outraged townsfolk. Adriana appeals to the duke for help in rescuing her husband from the Priory, Antipholus appeals for redress against Adriana, various merchants appeal for compensation, and even the town courtesan and the local abbess try to register complaints. Finally the duke loses his temper: "I think you are all mated, or stark mad," he growls at the assembled company (V.i.282). Faced with a series of incompatible--and apparently irreconcilable--accounts of the day's activities, Solinus finds himself unable to make sense of his citizens' stories and hence unable to redress the wrongs with which they have charged one another. The situation is, as Adriana terms it earlier in the same scene, "past thought of human reason" (189).

The action in this scene turns on a play on the word "matedness," a synonym in the sixteenth century for both "confounded" and "matched."²² As the duke's inadvertent

²²OED, 2nd ed., s.v. "mated," 1. "Confounded, amazed"; 2 a. "Matched; married."

pun reminds audiences, the errors and confusions to which the play's resident Ephesians and its visiting Syracusans have fallen victim are interwoven with the various familial and romantic pairings in which they are caught up. Furthermore, this association between being romantically mated--that is, being a couple--and being "past thought of human reason"--that is, being mad--is linked throughout the play with threats to various forms of property. I want to shift now to a discussion of these pairings and to suggest that the affective relations of the household are presented in *The Comedy of Errors* as a positive force that appalls reason and confounds property even as it allows for the reunification of Egeon's family and a tentative resolution of the conflict between the domestic and the commercial realms in Ephesus.

III. Confounded Properties

One of Shakespeare's most focused explorations of the challenge to normative notions of reason and ownership posed by affective relationships appears in "The Phoenix and Turtle." Published in 1601 as part of a collection of poems appended to Robert Chester's *Love's Martyr, or Rosalin's Complaint, Allegorically Shadowing the Truth of Love, in the Constant Fate of the Phoenix and Turtle*, Shakespeare's elegy recounts the love and death of an unlikely avian couple, the mythic Arabian phoenix and an ordinary domestic turtledove.

Like *The Comedy of Errors*, "The Phoenix and Turtle" literalizes the relationship between competing accounts of the self in community.²³ The turtledove is a common bird, a native to England most often associated with constancy in love.²⁴ The phoenix, on the other hand, is emblematic of both unique perfection and complete autonomy. According to classical myth, the phoenix survived alone in the Arabian desert. When it had lived for between five and six hundred years, it immolated itself atop a funeral pyre only to rise again from the ashes with renewed youth and vigour. In Shakespeare's poem, however, the phoenix appears to have sacrificed its powers of self-generation. Tamed by its love for the domestic turtledove, the wild phoenix has traded its self-sufficiency and even its immortality for a mortal life enriched by the experience of love.

The poem is written in three sections: in the first, a procession of birds mourn the deaths of the phoenix and the turtledove; in the second, the mourners sing an anthem in which love--represented by the relationship between the phoenix and the turtledove--confounds reason; and in the third, reason speaks a concluding threnody. Whether

²³Jonathan Crewe has also used "The Phoenix and Turtle" to gloss *The Comedy of Errors*, but he reads what he calls the "paradoxical formulas" of the poem as a model of the mythic golden age for which he claims the characters of *Errors* pine. See Jonathan V. Crewe, "God or The Good Physician: The Rational Playwright in *The Comedy of Errors*," *Genre* 15 (1982): 211-12.

²⁴Cf. the Riverside's gloss on the poem's title (1891).

Shakespeare's poem in fact allegorically shadows the truth of some actual historical love as Chester's title page promises, remains a matter for debate. A number of scholars have read the poem as an account of the relationship between Queen Elizabeth and the Earl of Essex; other candidates for the roles of phoenix and turtledove have included Sir John Salisbury and his lady and the Earl and Countess of Bedford.²⁵ I am less interested, however, in reading the poem as political allegory than I am in using its account of the effects of love on the self to clarify the basis on which *The Comedy of Errors* thematizes the communitarian impulses²⁶ of the household.

²⁵See Hallett Smith's introduction to "The Phoenix and Turtle" in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd ed., ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 1889.

²⁶My use of the term "communitarian" here invokes a notion of political agency that emphasizes the value of community to the formation of the individual self. According to philosophers as diverse as Charles Taylor, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Seyla Benhabib classical liberalism's individualistic focus has promoted an atomistic view of selfhood, one that understands individuals as disassociated from the social relations that surround them. These communitarian thinkers challenge the resulting agonistic view of society by arguing that its emphasis on individual rather than communal rights is predicated on a fundamental misreading of the nature of community. For a discussion of communitarianism and its quarrels with liberalism, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1981); Charles Taylor, "Cross-Purposes: The Liberal-Communitarian Debate," in *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, ed. Nancy L. Rosenblum (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 159-81; and esp. Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community, and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

In Shakespeare's poem, the phoenix and the turtledove love as "two distincts," but at the same time their relationship is said to admit no "division" (25-26). This apparently impossible state of being, in which the lovers are both separate yet undivided, in which "Either [becomes] the other's mine" (36), destroys the very concept of number and in so doing presents a serious threat to a social order based on normative conceptions of individual identity and on the ownership of private property:

Property was thus appalled,
That the self was not the same;
Single nature's double name
Neither two nor one was called.

(37-40)

"Property" here refers not simply to the material possessions whose ownership is rendered unclear by love, but also to the uniqueness that ostensibly divides one individual from another. Love, the argument goes, insists on a balance of sameness and difference between lovers. By transforming the self from a singular into a plural, love terrifies property by threatening to render the notion of a fully differentiated, autonomous self meaningless, and also by collapsing the distinctions between "mine" and "thine" upon which notions of ownership are based.

By threatening to destabilize a system of social order that constructs selfhood as the product of outer markers such as possessions, love seems to contravene reason:

Reason, in itself confounded,
Saw division grow together,
To themselves yet either neither,
Simple were so well compounded:

That it cried, "How true a twain
Seemeth this concordant one!
Love hath reason, Reason none,
If what parts, can so remain."

(41-48)

Stumped by love's ability to fuse divisions, reason admits that, despite its clear violation of the rules of logic, love has both a purpose and a sense all its own. Like property, reason is confused and defeated by love's insistence that two individuals can exist in a state of inseparable togetherness without ever completely losing their independent properties.

In *The Comedy of Errors* as in "The Phoenix and Turtle" the affective relations of the household destabilize conceptions of the self as a fully autonomous agent and challenge normative notions of reason and ownership. Indeed, romantic love proves itself capable of fantastic transformations throughout the play. In a wonderfully comic

moment immediately following the meal he shares with his brother's wife, Antipholus of Syracuse meets up with Dromio before the Phoenix:

S. Ant. Why, how now, Dromio, where run'st thou so fast?

S. Dro. Do you know me, sir? Am I Dromio? Am I your man? Am I myself?

S. Ant. Thou art Dromio, thou art my man, thou art thyself.

S. Dro. I am an ass, I am a woman's man, and besides myself.

S. Ant. What woman's man, and how besides thyself?

S. Dro. Marry, sir, besides myself, I am due to a woman: one that claims me, one that haunts me, one that will have me.

(III.ii.71-83)

Echoing his master's earlier fears about demonic possession, Dromio claims that he has been transformed, made "an ass," "a woman's man," somehow transported out of himself. It soon becomes clear, however, that Dromio is being "haunted" not by a spirit, but by the love of a woman of some considerable substance ("she's the kitchen wench and all grease" [95]). Such physicalized images of love's transformative powers occur throughout the play;²⁷ the most

²⁷Perhaps the most bewildering of these physicalized images of love's transformative powers is Antipholus of
(continued...)

articulate account of how affective relations shape individuals is provided by Adriana.

In the second act, Antipholus of Syracuse and Dromio run afoul of Adriana and her sister on the mart. Believing herself to have been disavowed by a husband she already suspects of adultery, Adriana mistakes Antipholus for his brother and pours out her hurt at being forsaken:

Ay, ay, Antipholus, look strange and frown,

Some other mistress hath thy sweet aspects:

I am not Adriana, nor thy wife.

The time was once, when thou unurg'd wouldst vow

That never words were music to thine ear,

That never object pleasing in thine eye,

That never touch well welcome to thy hand,

That never meat sweet-savor'd in thy taste,

Unless I spake, or look'd, or touch'd or carv'd

to thee.

(II.ii.110-118)

Adriana's repeated use of negatives here underscores the irony of Antipholus's bizarre situation. She begins by speaking an odd kind of truth--this woman is not, as she insists, his wife--but her tone is also accusatory.

Adriana's intention is to shame with her sarcasm the husband

²⁷(...continued)

Syracuse's assertion that his love for Luciana has the power to turn him into his beloved: "Call thyself sister, sweet, for I am thee" (III.ii.66).

she suspects of philandering, but she also tries to understand his defection and to counter it with an impassioned plea for love and respect. Echoing the water-drop image used by Antipholus of Ephesus in his earlier soliloquy, Adriana offers up a vision of companionate marriage that challenges the rules of reason as clearly as does the love of the phoenix and the turtledove:

How comes it now, my husband, O, how comes it,
 That thou art then estranged from thyself?
 Thyself I call it, being strange to me,
 That, undividable incorporate,
 Am better than thy dear self's better part.
 Ah, do not tear away thyself from me;
 For know, my love, as easy mayst thou fall
 A drop of water in the breaking gulf,
 And take unmingled thence that drop again,
 Without addition or diminishing,
 As take from me thyself and not me too.

(II.ii.119-29)

Appealing to her husband to recognize her as a valuable and inseparable part of himself, Adriana constructs a picture of marriage in which each spouse has become part of the other so completely that the boundaries between their individual identities have been permanently confounded. Echoing a conventional Protestant trope of marriage as the unification of two bodies, she argues that it has become impossible for

one half of this "undividable" union to sever itself from the other without inflicting damage. In a wedding sermon preached in 1607, Robert Abbot, bishop of Salisbury, uses this same image to describe marriage as the spiritual incorporation of husband and wife:

the breach and separation betwixt the husband and the wife, because they are but one flesh, is a thing as unnaturall as is the renting and sundring of one member of the bodie from another. This cannot bee in the bodie without paine and grieve.²⁸

According to both Adriana and Abbot then, marriage requires the confounding of individual identities. The loss of unconditional autonomy entailed by such a union is not presented as a threat to human happiness, however. On the contrary, Adriana clearly takes comfort in love's ability to compound the self²⁹ by transforming "me" and "thyself" into "me too," or even, as her homonym insists, "me two."³⁰

²⁸Robert Abbot, *A Wedding Sermon Preached at Bentley in Darby-shire, upon Michaelmasse Day last past Anno Domini. 1607* (London, 1608), 47-48.

²⁹In "The Phoenix and Turtle," reason is "confounded" as the lovers are "compounded":

Reason, in itself confounded,
Saw division grow together,
To themselves yet either neither,
Simple were so well compounded:
(41-44)

³⁰Barbara Freedman has suggested that: "[a]ccording to Adriana, there is no "thyself," no sense of identity
(continued...)

Adriana has been accused of rebelliously shrewish behaviour,³¹ but while her relational conception of selfhood challenges his claims to complete autonomy, I see no evidence that she attempts to undermine her husband's authority. She is certainly infuriated when Antipholus fails to return home for dinner, but, while she lets her frustration show, it would be a mistake to read her comments as an attempt to subvert the patriarchal order upon which her household rests. In the course of a brief disputation with her sister about the respective roles of husbands and wives in marriage, Adriana argues that women should expect respect from their husbands, but she never attacks Antipholus or his role as master of their household. Indeed, it is Luciana's self-righteous tone as much as her husband's behaviour that instigates Adriana's remarks. She begins by querying her sister's Pauline assertion that "[a] man is master of his liberty":

³⁰(...continued)
separable from one's identification with others. Yet her language simultaneously acknowledges a self separable from her, just as the play acknowledges an Antipholus of Syracuse separate and different from Antipholus of Ephesus" ("Egeon's Debt," 382). I would argue, however, that Adriana's substantive and rhetorical emphasis is on love's ability to compound, rather than to efface, individual identity and that her vision of selfhood is therefore consistent.

³¹C. L. Barber, for instance, characterizes Adriana as "domineering" shrew who indulges in fits of "self-defeating rage" and "frenz[ies] of rage" motivated by extreme jealousy ("Shakespearian Comedy," 495). Antipholus of Ephesus also, of course, accuses his wife of being "shrewish" and of upbraiding him (see III.i.2; 109-13).

Adr. Why should their liberty than ours be more?

Luc. Because their business still lies out a' door.

Adr. Look when I serve him so, he takes it ill.

Luc. O, know he is the bridle of your will.

Adr. There's none but asses will be bridled so.

(II.i.7, 10-14)

Adriana resists the notion that women should allow themselves to be "bridled" by their husbands, but her observation that Antipholus "takes it ill" when she mistreats him hardly constitutes a threat to the stability of domestic life at the Phoenix. Instead, this exchange suggests that the real threat to Adriana and Antipholus's marriage lies in the marketplace, with "business" that "lies out a' door." Since the precise nature of the business that takes men away from home is not explored here, the presumably legitimate commerce Antipholus undertakes in order to keep his household in roast capon and the illicit trade in which he engages at the Porpentine are neatly conflated.

Adriana's vision of the self as associative and relational constitutes an emotionally charged challenge to the conventional Aristotelian notion that the *oikos* comprises a non-public, imperfectly rational sphere dominated by non-citizens (including slaves, children, and women) who are unable to access the public, fully rational sphere of the *polis* and are therefore unable to participate

in the formulation of notions of the good.³² Although she does not seek to participate in Ephesian life as a free citizen herself, Adriana points up the interconnectedness of household and marketplace. On her account of selfhood, business that takes men "out a' door" jeopardizes the stability of the domestic sphere when it is not tempered by a respect for household matters. Similarly, domestic strife is capable of exceeding the bounds of the household and contaminating the public sphere when this balance between the domestic and civic sides of social existence is not achieved. Rather than seeking to challenge Antipholus's household authority, however, Adriana seeks to reinforce the importance of her husband's domestic responsibilities as a means of resisting the intrusion of the commercial world.

She may not be silent, but Adriana's account of marriage suggests that she understands her role as wife as one of chaste obedience. "Come, I will fasten on this sleeve of thine," Adriana promises Antipholus, "Thou art an elm, my husband, I a vine, / Whose weakness, married to thy stronger state, / Makes me with thy strength to communicate" (II.ii.173-76). As her use of this highly conventional emblem for relations of dominance and deference to describe the relationship between husband and wife suggests, Adriana's view of marriage is hardly subversive. Her

³²See Aristotle, *The Politics of Aristotle*, ed. and trans. Ernest Barker (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), Bk. I "The Theory of the Household," 1-87.

picture of a vegetable love that allows a woman to draw strength from her husband does have a darker side, however. While strength can be passed between a couple, so can weakness. Using the image of a cannibalistic natural world, Adriana offers a logical proof for the importance of faithfulness in marriage:

I am possess'd with an adulterate blot;
My blood is mingled with the crime of lust:
For if we two be one, and thou play false,
I do digest the poison of thy flesh,
Being strumpeted by thy contagion.
Keep then fair league and truce with thy true bed,
I live dis-stain'd, thou undishonored.

(II.ii.140-46)

According to Adriana, a husband's adultery poses a threat to his wife because marriage has transformed both partners into two inseparable halves of a romantic union. As Camille Wells Slights has pointed out, Adriana's eloquent plea for fidelity in marriage is hardly the "tirade of a comic virago bent on mastery."³³ Nevertheless, the logic of Adriana's depiction of the corrosive effects of adultery does imply that both husband and wife are vulnerable to contagion through each other.

It is perhaps tempting to understand the fact that Adriana addresses her heartfelt entreaties to a stranger

³³Slights, *Shakespeare's Comic Commonwealths*, 19.

rather than to her husband as a mitigation of her views on adultery and as an ironic challenge to her relational conception of selfhood. I would argue, however, that her misidentification of Antipholus of Ephesus is best read as a literalization of the transformative powers ascribed throughout the play to the affective relations of the household. Just as Dromio of Syracuse becomes an ass in the course of his encounter with Adriana's kitchen wench, so the transformation of Antipholus of Syracuse from homeless traveller into Ephesian family man begun by Dromio's first urgent call to dinner is cemented in the course of the wanderer's meeting with Adriana. The play offers proof that Antipholus's transformation is more than a superficial error when the young Syracusan courts Luciana. Speaking to his beloved, Antipholus declares:

It is thyself, mine own self's better part:
 Mine eye's clear eye, my dear heart's dearer
 heart,
 My food, my fortune, and my sweet hope's aim,
 My sole earth's heaven, and my heaven's claim.

(III.ii.61-4)

Antipholus's account of love bears a striking resemblance to Adriana's commentary on the nature of matedness. Echoing Adriana's paradoxical language--Luciana is both herself and his "own self's better part"--Antipholus declares himself ready to trade his solitary life for the joys and

responsibilities of a household of his own. Describing his autonomous existence as "feeble, shallow, weak" (III.ii.35), identifying as vine rather than elm, Antipholus seeks strength in a loving relationship with Luciana. "Are you a god?" he asks her, "Would you create me new? / Transform me then, and to your pow'r I'll yield" (39-40). As Antipholus's vision of romantic partnership insists, dependency in love is not gendered--it is, rather, the inevitable product of the affective relationship that gives household life in Ephesus its shape.

Antipholus's desire for love appalls property by its willingness to breach the autonomy of the self in favour of a romantic union. It also appalls Luciana, however, for whom Antipholus's proposal is the talk of a two-timing husband intent on bedding his sister-in-law. She associates such a trespass of propriety with madness: "What, are you mad, that you do reason so?" she asks the ardent Antipholus. To which Antipholus, foreshadowing Solinus's exasperation at the end of play, replies, "Not mad, but mated" (53-54).

* * *

At the beginning of *The Comedy of Errors* the Antipholus brothers are intent on defining the properties of a fully individuated self--that is, they are preoccupied with ascertaining the constitutive features of a self construed as completely autonomous agent. By the end of the play, however, both men have discovered that unqualified autonomy

is possible only outside the bonds of community. As events in Ephesus demonstrate, commitment to the affective relations of the household entails sacrificing a degree of personal freedom--just the kind of willing alienation of self associated with madness. A conception of reason predicated on the existence of a self dissociable from the social relations that surround it must be confounded before the errors of the play can be resolved. Adriana's notion of the "undividable incorporate" insists that selves are constituted by the affective relationships in which they participate, and that division of self from community, of commercial identity from domestic identity, of family member from family member is not simply destructive but ultimately impossible. *The Comedy of Errors* thus emphasizes the importance of understanding the household as a constitutive feature of civic life. The good life, the play suggests, may be defined in the public spaces of the marketplace and the forum, but these spaces are in turn sustained and affected by the lived experience of the household.

I have focused throughout this chapter on an analysis of the familial and communal bonds explored in *The Comedy of Errors*, and have argued that relationships between family members in Ephesus are presented as a necessary counter to civic relationships that can enable only partial fulfilment of their visions of the good life. I turn in the following

chapter to an investigation of the everyday world of Shakespeare's only English comedy, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. In Windsor, as in Ephesus, the household is presented as an intrinsic component of civil society. In *Merry Wives*, however, the focus shifts from an exploration of the balance of power between household and marketplace, to an exploration of the operations of power and authority within the household itself.

While the action of *The Comedy of Errors* demonstrates the dangers of underestimating the power of the household to affect both individuals and their communities, Luciana's assertion that men wield greater authority because they must attend to commercial demands beyond the walls of the household is never challenged. In *Merry Wives*, on the other hand, Alice Ford and Margaret Page take spirited control of life in Windsor and their authority is shown to derive specifically from the household itself, rather than from an emancipation from household duties. By turning their domestic responsibilities into opportunities for revenge upon Falstaff, the merry wives discover in housekeeping a means of asserting their claim that women can be "merry, and yet honest too" (IV.ii.105).

Chapter Three

"The Warrant of Womanhood" in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*

The Merry Wives of Windsor tells a small world tale. Set in a modest early modern town nestled in the English countryside, the play recounts the everyday goings-on of a small group of friends and neighbours. The play's emphasis on the here and now of lived experience often manifests itself in an acute attention to detail. In the first scene, for instance, we learn that Abraham Slender has been robbed of exactly "seven groats in mill-sixpences, and two Edward shovel-boards, that cost [him] two shilling and two pence a-piece of Yead Miller" (I.i.155-57). Such exactitude reflects more, I think, than merely a determination on Slender's part to recover all of his stolen property. The precision with which he enumerates his losses offers audiences a remarkably detailed picture of not only the contents of the young man's purse and the "matter in [his] head" (I.i.123), but also of the social world that he inhabits.

Slender has lost a purse full of recognizably contemporary English money. Indeed, any member of the

play's late-sixteenth-century audience might easily have used Slender's precise reckoning to expose him as an unreliable witness at his own informal trial: a groat was a common coin worth 4d; 2s. 4d. (or 28d) is not a sum divisible by six; thus Slender's claim that Falstaff's "cony-catching rascals" (I.i.124-25) have stolen "seven groats in mill-sixpences" is inaccurate. Even if their mathematical skills were as limited as Slender's, a contemporary audience would surely have noted the young man's claim to have been robbed of "two Edward shovel-boards" for which he admits to paying more than twice the face value. This is not necessarily further proof of Slender's slow-wittedness. These large shilling coins--put in circulation, as their nickname suggests, during the reign of Edward VI (1547-53)--were apparently in demand throughout the latter half of the sixteenth century because once worn smooth by years of use they made perfect tokens for the game of shovel-board. As H. C. Hart has speculated, such demand may well have increased the price of these old coins.¹ Nevertheless, Slender's admission that he has paid 4s. 4d. for a pair of playing tokens provides an early hint that he may be a less than effective advocate of his own interests, financial and otherwise.

¹See Hart's gloss of this passage in William Shakespeare, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, The Arden Shakespeare, ed. H. C. Hart (London: Methuen, 1904).

Slender's specificity in this instance does more than reveal him as something of a dupe, however. His precision about his missing game pieces also serves to emphasize both the play's contemporaneity and its focus on everyday life. Sometimes called shove-board, slide-groat, or shove-groat, shovel-board, was a popular board game in which a coin was driven by a blow with the hand along a highly polished surface, usually a table, marked with numbered transverse lines. (A modern version of the game, shove-halfpenny, is still played throughout the United States, and the larger-scale shuffleboard is another popular descendent of Slender's chosen pastime.) Early references to shovel-board suggest that it was primarily a gambling game. According to the *OED*, the first mention of the game appears in Henry VIII's *Privy Purse Expenses* for the year 1532, which records a payment to "my lord Wylliam for that he wanne of the kinges grace at shovillaborde." Even if Lord William's winning streak had lasted another forty odd years, his earnings would likely not have been recorded in such formal documents during Elizabeth's reign when shovel-board seems to have been outlawed in at least one major town. By 1575, the records of the city of Oxford referred to "All unlawfull games, as . . . tables [backgammon], bowlls, shovelborde."²

²*OED*, 2nd ed., s.v. "shovel-board," 1 a, a, Henry VIII, *The Privy Purse Expenses of 1529-32*, ix li; *Selections from the Records of the City of Oxford 1509-83*, ed. William H. Turner, 364.

Thus when Slender complains of his missing Edward shovel-boards he evokes a common gambling game with a long, slightly shady, history and thereby situates *Merry Wives* firmly within a distinctly contemporary English setting. Just as chess often appears in early modern drama as a symbol of aristocratic values, courtly intrigues, and dynastic strategizing,³ so Slender's casual mention of shovel-board seems to act here as a metonymic figure for everyday middle class life in an ordinary sixteenth-century English town.

The play is crowded with similarly commonplace details. In the first scene alone specifics continue to fly thick and fast. Indeed, despite the ostentatious figure he surely cuts in his oft-mentioned gloves and his hat (153, 158, 165, 170), the whining Slender is almost completely drowned out by the sensory detail that saturates the Page household. The aroma of the wine and "hot venison pasty" lunch about to grace the Pages' dinner table (189; 195), the noisy barking of hunting dogs (89-96; 286-87), and the babble of a dozen

³I am thinking here of Thomas Middleton's *A Game of Chess*. The play deals allegorically with the rivalry between England and Spain, a rivalry that intensified the year before the play was first performed when King James I attempted to negotiate a Spanish marriage for his son, Prince Charles. Middleton's *Women Beware Women* also includes a pivotal chess playing scene during which Livia holds the attention of the young Bianca's guardian with a game of chess, while above Bianca struggles to avoid the clutches of a lecherous duke. See also my discussion in Chapter Four of the scene in *The Tempest* in which Miranda and Ferdinand play at chess.

voices swell to fill the scene with a surfeit of domestic detail. Like the Homeric catalogue that emphasizes the grand scale of the epic, in *Merry Wives* the cumulative weight of ordinary people, surrounded by everyday objects, and concerned with parochial matters seems to underscore the play's distinctly small scale. The play's focus never extends much beyond the confines of the particular town in which it is set, and the implications of the activities that constitute the action of the play--the poaching of Shallow's deer, the negotiating of Anne Page's marriage, the punishing of Falstaff's attempts at seduction--seem unlikely to affect matters beyond these civic limits.

The play's focus on such prosaic matters does not vitiate its commentary on a number of important issues, however. On the contrary, attention to material detail in *Merry Wives* serves to emphasize the play's preoccupation with identifying the moral dimension of ordinary life. Although scholarly interest in the domestic details of Renaissance life faded as New Criticism gained a foothold in the academy, early feminist historians like Alice Clark argued that the material conditions of everyday life in early modern England had a significant impact on conceptions of class and gender.⁴ More particularly, such studies of daily life in the Renaissance point to the degree to which

⁴See Alice Clark, *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century* (1919; London: Routledge, 1982).

early modern culture invested everyday objects with complex ritual meaning. One early historian of sixteenth-century life, for instance, discusses the "ceremony" involved in the preparation of the midday meal in a "well-to-do household":

a cloth was laid upon the table, and at every place was set a trencher [wooden plate], a napkin, and a spoon. . . . Wine, ale, and drinking vessels . . . stood on the buffet, and the servants filled a clean goblet or Venetian drinking glass when any guest called for liquor.

In the kitchen quarters the butler took pains to chip the bread in order to remove any cinders from the crust, and he also squared each piece neatly before he set it on the board. Finally, the great salt-cellar would be placed on the table, and with basin, ewer, and fine damask towel ready to hand for the diners' ablutions, all was prepared.⁵

That such care was taken with elaborate and highly labour-intensive arrangements emphasizes the ritual roles that both preparing and consuming a communal meal played in sixteenth-century England.

Elaborating on the ceremonial aspect of such meals, Lu Emily Pearson notes the powerful association between particular domestic objects and the enactment of class-based

⁵Muriel St. Clare Byrne, *Elizabethan Life in Town and Country* (1925; revised edition London: Methuen, 1961), 56.

hierarchies. Discussing the ritual function of the basin provided for cleansing the hands, she explains: "if different ranks were not represented at table, one basin was frequently used for a small company, two or three washing their hands at the same time, but if guests of various ranks were present, there must be one basin for each rank."⁶

Literary critics have recently begun to explore the implications that such associations between ordinary objects like hand basins and specific cultural assumptions about class, social belonging, and constructions of selfhood have for readings of early modern literature. Patricia Fumerton's work on social ornamentation in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries has, for instance, drawn attention to the strong link between everyday objects and a complex matrix of political, social, and cultural value in the aristocratic circles of early modern England. Fumerton argues persuasively that such apparently trivial aesthetic fragments as miniatures, pieces of jewellery, and sonnets carried substantial cultural freight in the period. Rather than being dismissed as inconsequential, the "luxurious bric-a-brac of the aristocrat's everyday life" ought, she insists, to be read as the markers of a society eager to

⁶Lu Emily Pearson, *Elizabethans at Home* (Stanford University Press, 1957), 565, quoted in Joseph Candido, "Dining Out in Ephesus: Food in *The Comedy of Errors*," *Studies in English Literature* 30 (1990), 239n13. .

understand itself as cultural artifact.⁷ Viviana Comensoli's book on the domestic drama of the period also emphasizes the relationship between material objects and daily rituals to early modern literature by, for example, explaining the ritual significance attached to salt and salters at the sixteenth-century dining table as a way of initiating a discussion of the reification of class stratification in Thomas Heywood's *A Woman Killed with Kindness*.⁸

Like the work of Comensoli and Fumerton, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* draws attention to the relationship between the everyday world and the construction of social value. Consider, for example, the following exchange between Alice Ford and John Falstaff:

<i>Fal.</i>	. . . I'll speak it before the best lord, I would make thee my lady.
<i>Mrs. Ford.</i>	I your lady, Sir John? Alas, I should be a pitiful lady!
<i>Fal.</i>	Let the court of France show me such another. I see how thine eye would emulate the diamond. Thou hast the right arch'd beauty of the brow that

⁷See Patricia Fumerton, *Cultural Aesthetics: Renaissance Literature and the Practice of Social Ornament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 1.

⁸See Viviana Comensoli, *Household Business: Domestic Plays of Early Modern England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 65-109, especially 72.

becomes the ship-tire, the tire-valiant,
or any tire of Venetian admittance.

Mrs. Ford. A plain kerchief, Sir John. My brows
become nothing else, nor that well
neither.

Fal. By the Lord, thou art a tyrant to say
so. Thou wouldst make an absolute
courtier, and the firm fixture of thy
foot would give an excellent motion to
thy gait in a semicircled farthingale.

(III.iii.50-64)

During this first attempt by Falstaff to seduce Mistress Ford, women's fashions carry the central tensions of the scene. Clearly knowledgeable in matters of courtly vogue, Falstaff employs talk of the very latest in foreign styles as a tool for seduction. The "semicircled farthingale" that he mentions, for instance, was a Gallic mode which had begun gradually to supplant the popular Spanish farthingale in the most fashionable circles at the end of the sixteenth century. Modulating the hourglass shape created by the hooped petticoat of its Iberian precursor, the French farthingale substituted a stiff, curved bolster worn at the waist for conical cane hoops and, when covered by a gored

skirt and pointed bodice, gave its wearer a fuller, rounder figure.'

Falstaff's preference for this fuller, rounder shape seems in keeping with his generally sensualist propensities. Even as he tempts Mistress Ford to bed, the knight luxuriates in his own opulent rhetoric. His compliments are as extravagantly alliterative as they are ostentatiously *au courant*: the "beauty" of Alice Ford's "brow"--a conventional seat of female beauty in the sixteenth century--"becomes" the latest rage in Venetian headpieces; the "firm fixture" of her "foot" will set the newest "farthingale" swinging seductively. Mistress Ford is by comparison markedly plainspoken: "I should be a pitiful lady!" she demurs simply when faced with her would-be seducer's sumptuous discourse. While Falstaff speaks in extravagant Petrarchisms and fantasizes about transforming his beloved into a courtly lady clothed in lavish gowns and elaborate headpieces, Alice Ford insists that a "plain kerchief" is what suits her best. For Sir John Falstaff, high fashion clearly bespeaks the twin temptations of sensual pleasure and monied excess; for Alice Ford, however, such promised opulence is simply further evidence of the knight's corruption and unscrupulousness.

⁹For more on fashion in the sixteenth century, see Christopher Brewer, *The Culture of Fashion: A New History of Fashionable Dress* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 41-74; Byrne, *Elizabethan Life*, 53-72; Pearson, *Elizabethans at Home*, 575-605.

Thus the opposition here is not simply between Falstaff's concern with ostentatiously modish display and Mistress Ford's stalwart insistence on serviceability over aesthetics, but also between the dissolute knight's disregard for the integrity of the Ford household and Alice Ford's insistence on protecting her marriage. The simplicity of Alice's kerchief clearly represents a commitment to modesty of dress; at the same time, however, its practical value as a means of keeping her hair clean and tidy while she carries out her daily chores signals her commitment to the role of primary caretaker of both the Ford marriage and the Ford household. As Falstaff's unexpected journey from Alice's buck-basket to a cold dip in the muddy Thames soon proves, simple Mistress Ford of the "plain kerchief" turns out to be a far greater force than the fashionable court ladies in absurdly elegant head-dresses to whom Falstaff is presumably accustomed.

While the play points up the social symbolism both of common items like kerchiefs and clothes baskets and of banal activities like preparing a meal or doing the laundry, at the same time it reminds audiences that such everyday articles and tasks are invested with significant moral content. Indeed, its exploration of the moral dimension of the mundane is part of what gives *Merry Wives* much of its dramatic force and, at the same time, many of its most memorable farcical moments. When I suggest that everyday

chores have "moral content" I do not mean that activities like doing the dishes or making lunch can themselves be classified as either inherently good or inherently bad. Rather, I am trying to account for a phenomenon that most of us recognize but rarely discuss: that the (often unpaid and mostly unrecognized) domestic labour in which women still invest significantly more time than men has meaning in the moral domain.

Take, for instance, the example of childrearing. As any parent can attest, the everyday negotiations involved in raising a child are laden with ethical issues at both an allegorical and a literal level. Certainly dickering about who will change the baby's diaper can operate as a veiled means of working through such broad theoretical issues as the gendering of work: Should men perform tasks traditionally considered women's work? If not, should parenting always involve an equal division of labour? If so, does this mean that all tasks must be shared or are there in fact more equitable ways of allocating parental responsibility? And whose responsibility is it to ensure that all tasks are shared anyway? On the more literal level, the question of whose work will be interrupted by the unpleasantness of a dirty diaper is also a moral one in that it speaks with great immediacy to a couple's need to formulate rules and standards of behaviour for their child's care. The attention to the minutiae of daily existence in

Merry Wives encourages audiences to recognize just such a connection between ordinary life and the moral realm.

Despite its emphatic attention to domestic detail, however, when they engage with this neglected play at all critics seem unable to resist an impulse to allegorize its particularities. As I have already argued with reference to *The Comedy of Errors*, to allegorize household negotiations without retaining some sense of their literal meaning--that is, to read quarrels about diaper changing only as debates about the gendering of labour in late capitalist society--is to dismiss their particularities and thereby to risk losing the specificity of their insights about human behaviour and everyday lived experience. The primary victims of this impetus toward the allegorization of the household are women. In the case of *Merry Wives*, this has meant a critical tendency to ignore Alice Ford and Margaret Page, its titular heroines. Rather than celebrating these resourceful female characters as the central comic and moral agents in the play, critics have instead averted their eyes from the Windsor wives' efforts to prove themselves "merry, and yet honest too" (IV.ii.105), choosing instead to focus either on Falstaff--the play's delightfully inept would-be seducer--or on any number of more marginal characters. This critical refusal to acknowledge the moral complexity of the everyday negotiations among the Windsor townsfolk as intrinsically worthy of study stems, I would argue, from a

wider cultural assumption that the affective relations of the household--kinship, friendship, love--are personal rather than moral matters.

In the course of her discussion of modern notions of selfhood, Seyla Benhabib demonstrates how the debate in the early 1980s between Lawrence Kohlberg and Carol Gilligan crystallizes a number of important issues surrounding attempts to exclude questions of the good life pertaining to the affective relationships of the household from the privileged object domain of moral philosophy. Benhabib describes Kohlberg's cognitive-developmental model of moral psychology as the culmination of a philosophical tradition dating back to Hobbes. Hobbes promotes a moral relativism grounded in a male fantasy of *sui generis*: "Let us consider men," he proposes, "as if but even now sprung out of the earth, and suddenly, like mushrooms, come to full maturity, without all kind of engagement to each other."¹⁰ This influential account conceives of the self as patriarch, but also as fully autonomous agent unencumbered by familial or communal bonds. As Benhabib explains, despite attempts by Gilligan and others to broaden the sphere of justice to include household relations, the dominance of this model of

¹⁰Thomas Hobbes, "Philosophical Rudiments Concerning Government and Society," in *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, ed. W. Molesworth (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1966), vol. 2, 109, quoted in Benhabib, *Situating the Self*, 156.

selfhood has enabled the perpetuation on an exclusionary account of moral reasoning:

The sphere of justice from Hobbes through Locke and Kant is regarded as the domain where independent, male heads of household transact with one another, while the domestic-intimate sphere is put beyond the pale of justice and restricted to the reproductive and affective needs of the bourgeois paterfamilias. . . . An entire domain of human activity, namely, nurture, reproduction, love and care, which becomes the woman's lot in the course of the development of modern, bourgeois society, is excluded from moral and political considerations, and relegated to the realm of "nature."¹¹

I would argue that this naturalization of relationships that "elicit considerations of care"¹² and their exclusion from the moral domain (and hence from the sphere of justice) has translated, in Shakespeare studies, into an unwillingness to understand household negotiations as valid--even

¹¹Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 155.

¹²Lawrence Kohlberg, "Synopsis and Detailed Replies to Critics," with Charles Levine and Alexandra Hower, in L. Kohlberg, *Essays on Moral Development* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), vol. 2: *The Psychology of Moral Development*, 229, quoted in Benhabib, *Situating the Self*, 153.

intrinsic--components of the plays' complex discussions of the good life.

Although there has been a great deal of implicit resistance to the idea of *The Merry Wives of Windsor's* middle-aged matrons as the heros of a drama of sexual intrigue and revenge, Alice Ford and Margaret Page are clearly the protagonists of the play. It is they who succeed in defending the integrity of their households against the dual threat posed by the lustful Falstaff and the jealous Ford, and it is they who attempt to humanize these men by reminding them of the crucial role played by the household in the formulation of community values. Further, I would argue that the Windsor wives are able to mount a successful defence of the household precisely because of the authority that attends them as respected wives and mistresses of households.

The issue of the wives' authority to take action in defence of their households by revenging themselves upon Falstaff is addressed explicitly in the play's fourth act. Having twice punished the knight for his attempts to seduce them, Mistress Ford wonders aloud to her friend about the political and ethical implications of their actions:

What think you? May we, with the warrant of
womanhood and the witness of a good conscience,
pursue him with any further revenge?

(IV.ii.206-208)

Rather than supposing, with Hobbes, that women and the spheres of personal decision-making with which they are affiliated should be excluded from the sphere of justice, Mistress Ford assumes an explicit association between what Benhabib calls the "domestic-intimate sphere" and the process of ethical reasoning. Mistress Ford's question has much to do, of course, with a socially coercive notion of propriety; she is asking, in part, whether the complex of community values grouped under the rubric "womanhood" will allow her to defend her married chastity, to protect the integrity of her household, and to take revenge on Falstaff. Just as clearly, however, Alice Ford's query evokes the notion of ethical reasoning--the process whereby an individual agent evaluates the goodness or badness of an action, guided only by her own "good conscience." This rhetorical yoking of "womanhood" and ethical decision-making emphasizes that for Mistress Ford the household belongs squarely in the moral domain. This insistence on the household as a moral space also suggests that while at first blush Mistress Ford appears to evoke a coercive notion of womanhood that restricts women's behaviour, in fact the notion of a "warrant of womanhood" suggests that women have access to a distinct licence--a "warrant"--that authorizes their behaviour. As the play clearly demonstrates, the source of the Windsor wives' distinctly domestic brand of authority is the household. Rather than presenting the

Windsor households (and the institution of marriage that grounds them) as purely restrictive, then, *Merry Wives* instead suggests that the role of housewife can on occasion be a powerful one. Marshalling the forces of the household by turning its everyday chores and ordinary accoutrements into strategies and instruments of domestic revenge, Mistress Ford and Mistress Page insist on the inclusion of women's lived experience in the moral domain.

I. "'Tis howshould busines all"

The Merry Wives of Windsor is "domestic" in both sixteenth-century meanings of the term. The play explores its home-grown subjects within an explicitly native setting, and, less metaphorically, it takes as its primary focus the "domus" or household. Set in the town of Windsor, *Merry Wives* is the only comedy in the Shakespearean canon to take place entirely in early modern England. As if to emphasize its familiar locale, the play is replete with references to locations easily recognizable to its contemporary audience. Colbrooke, Reading, Maidenhead, and Datchet Mead--actual places in the vicinity of Windsor--are all mentioned at various points in the play. The Garter Inn, Windsor Castle, and the giant oak tree at which Falstaff meets his final humiliation are well-known local landmarks that play significant roles in the action. The literary culture in which the play so deliberately locates itself is also

notably English. Tottel's *Miscellany* (I.i.199), the *Book of Riddles* (I.i.201-202), Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* (III.iii.43), and Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (IV.v.69-70) are all evoked in the course of the play and help to emphasize its distinctly Tudor setting.

Merry Wives locates itself firmly in the geographically and culturally domestic environs of Elizabethan England. It embeds itself with equal determination in the private and particular realm of the household. Most of the action occurs inside a series of ordinary sixteenth-century households; Doctor Caius's house, the Pages' house, the Fords' house, and the Garter Inn all act as domestic backdrops at one point or another in the play. The ordinary hominess of these settings is echoed and increased by the prosaic nature of the play's action. Such everyday business as protecting their lands, marrying off their children, and gossiping about their neighbours preoccupies the citizens of Windsor.

Even the play's main plot, which follows Mistress Margaret Page and Mistress Alice Ford as they devise and execute a plan to punish Sir John Falstaff for his bumbling attempts to seduce them, has a distinctly commonplace flavour. These are ordinary, middle-aged women coping competently, even rather adventurously, with the potentially embarrassing and destructive but finally mundane problem of an unwanted suitor. The knight's come-ons are presented as

insulting and disruptive, but never as a serious threat to the stability of life in Windsor. Falstaff has mistakenly targeted two women who are more than capable of defending themselves, and much of the play's comedy derives from Falstaff's refusal to accept that these matriarchs wield more authority in Windsor than he does.

The setting for *The Merry Wives of Windsor*'s most dramatic moments--its comic cliffhangers--is the Ford household. It is in her own house, surrounded by the accumulated detritus of years of married life, that Falstaff seeks to tempt Mistress Ford to adultery. And it is in her own house, amid her chests, trunks, and wall-hangings, that Mistress Ford and her friend, Mistress Page, twice trick the reprobate knight into revealing his cowardliness and thereby revenge themselves upon him.¹³ Indeed, the Ford household seems almost to play an active role in punishing its mistress's would-be lover.

When Falstaff arrives at Alice Ford's house he is confidently spouting romantic poetry: "'Have I caught thee, my heavenly jewel?'" he calls out upon entering (III.iii.43).¹⁴ While he fancies that he has "caught" a

¹³The Ford household is also the setting in which the Windsor wives finally choose to tell their husbands (and Parson Evans) about the tricks they have been playing on Falstaff. See IV.iv.1-90.

¹⁴Falstaff is quoting here from the Second Song of Sidney's popular sonnet sequence *Astrophil and Stella* (1591): "Have I caught my heavenly jewel / Teaching sleep
(continued...)"

rich prize in his amorous trap, the tables are soon turned and the larcenous knight instead finds himself trapped in Mistress Ford's house with the good folk of Windsor bearing down upon him. Unable to flee, his only route of escape cut off by Mistress Page's impending arrival at the front door, Falstaff has no choice but to conceal himself in the house. But the household he at first found so permeable, so open to approach, so violable, appears suddenly to have stopped itself up against him. Although Parson Evans will later suggest searching the house's locked chambers, coffers, presses for Mistress Ford's illicit gentleman caller (III.iii.211-12), Falstaff's frantic search for a hiding place turns up no welcoming hidey-holes; only a hanging tapestry affords the fat knight any protection. "I will ensconce me behind the arras," he announces (III.iii.89-90), echoing the words of another plump intruder concealed in a lady's chamber.¹⁵ Unlike Polonius, however, Falstaff eventually emerges from his hiding place, frightened but unscathed. When they feel that Falstaff has been sufficiently chastened, the women finally offer him salvation in the unlikely form of a giant buck-basket.

¹⁴(...continued)
most fair to be?" (Sir Philip Sidney, *Sir Philip Sidney: A Critical Edition of the Major Works*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989], 182).

¹⁵In *Hamlet*, Claudius and Polonius hatch a plan to spy upon the prince in his mother's chamber. "Behind the arras I'll convey myself," Polonius announces (III.iii.28).

"[C]onvey, convey him out," exclaims Mistress Page, playing the part of agitated gossip to the hilt (III.iii.117-18). Desperate to escape the jealous Ford, Falstaff leaps at any chance to leave the house--"Let me see't, let see't, O, let me see't! I'll in, I'll in. Follow your friend's counsel. I'll in," he hollers urgently at Mistress Ford (III.iii.136-38). And seconds later Sir John Falstaff makes good his undignified escape crouched in a laundry basket and covered with dirty linen on the shoulders of Mistress Ford's serving men.

If household hiding places are in short supply the first time he is trapped chez Ford, the second time that Falstaff arrives for an assignation with Alice secretive chambers seem to abound. Mistress Ford alone mentions a kill-hole, a press, a coffer, a chest, a trunk, a well, and a vault as possible hiding places (see IV.ii.58; 61). Just as the household seems prepared to shelter the knight from the angry citizens of Windsor, however, Mistress Ford objects that her husband knows its hiding places too well: "he hath an abstract for the remembrance of such places, and goes to them by his note," she announces. "There is no hiding you in the house" (IV.ii.62-64). The only hope for his escape, Alice and Margaret tell Falstaff, is to use old clothes from an upstairs closet to disguise himself as an old woman.

Twice then the merry wives exact upon Falstaff a markedly domestic revenge. Rather than reporting his advances to their husbands, or even running him through with a sword themselves, Alice Ford and Margaret Page use the everyday household materials that surround them to punish the presumptuous knight. Allegorically, their plan to deliver him to the Thames for washing and bleaching can be read as an attempt to purge Falstaff by symbolically washing him clean of sinful desires. On a more literal level, however, the hominess of their plan reminds us of the crucial role that household matters can play in public life. By plotting to dump Falstaff in the "muddy ditch" at Datchet Mead, Mistresses Ford and Page remind audience members and their fellow townsfolk alike that the products of a menial chore like washing laundry are worn beyond the boundaries of the household itself. Dirty linen, they remind both Falstaff and Alice's jealous husband, always risks being washed in public. Like *The Comedy of Errors'* Adriana, the wives of Windsor demonstrate that *oikos* and *polis* cannot effectively be separated; their joke also insists on the moral content of domestic chores by literalizing the role of the household in the ejection of Falstaff for his adulterous plot.

If Falstaff's punishment speaks to the moral content of domestic tasks, it also reminds us that domestic spaces are imbued with moral value. Such are the dynamics of what

Gaston Bachelard has called the "poetics of space."¹⁶ While Falstaff's attempts to hide himself behind the arras in Mistress Ford's chamber are reminiscent of Polonius's ill-fated attempts to spy on Hamlet and Gertrude, his unceremonious ejection from the Ford household in a buck-basket calls to mind yet another Shakespearean character who secrets himself in a woman's chamber in order to spy on her. In *Cymbeline*, Iachimo devises a plot to trick Posthumous into believing that his wife, Imogen, has committed adultery. Having concealed himself in a trunk delivered to Imogen's bedchamber, Iachimo waits until all is quiet and then uncoils himself in order to spy upon the sleeping woman. Emerging from his trunk, Iachimo creeps around Imogen's room, enumerating her belongings and cataloguing even her most private possessions:

Such and such pictures; there the window; such
 Th' adornment of her bed; the arras, figures,
 Why, such and such; and the contents o' th' story.
 Ah, but some natural notes about her body,
 Above ten thousand meaner moveables
 Would testify, t' enrich mine inventory.

 On her left breast
 A mole cinque-spotted, like the crimson drops

¹⁶See Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Presses Universitaires de France, 1958; Boston: Beacon, 1994).

I' th' bottom of a cowslip. Here's a voucher,
 Stronger than ever law could make; this secret
 Will force him think I have pick'd the lock and
 ta'en
 The treasure of her honor.

(II.ii.25-42)

This scene is deeply disturbing because although she comes to no physical harm at Iachimo's hands, Imogen nevertheless survives a terrible violation. Georgianna Ziegler aptly describes Iachimo's voyeuristic invasion of Imogen's bedroom as "a rape of her private space."¹⁷ While Iachimo's mere presence--illicit, clandestine, immoral--provides ample horror here, the precision of the night-stalker's whispered inventory of Imogen's body and belongings adds another dimension of terror to the scene. By enumerating her possessions, Iachimo enacts an ocular and verbal theft of the princess's private effects, a burglary that extends metaphorically from her furniture, pictures, tapestries, and ornaments to the five-spotted mole on her left breast. As Iachimo knows, even more than the bracelet that he steals from Imogen's arm, the key to his plot to convince Posthumous that his wife has voluntarily opened "the lock"

¹⁷Georgianna Ziegler, "My Lady's Chamber: Female Space, Female Chastity in Shakespeare," *Textual Practice* 4.1 (1990), 84.

that safeguards the "treasure of her honor" rests in the precision of his description of Imogen's body.

Falstaff's boisterous invasions of the Ford household appear far less threatening than Iachimo's nightmarish violation of Imogen's bedchamber, but they are invasions of the private realm of the household--and the inner chambers of the household--nonetheless. And, like Iachimo's theft of intimate knowledge, Falstaff's adulterous propositions, essentially attempts to rob the merry wives of their married chastity, render the source of their communal authority vulnerable by disrupting their relative domestic harmony. While many critics are tempted to understand the ordinary setting and mundane matter of *Merry Wives* as merely emblematic of what are often cast as "larger" political concerns, in such ways the play itself consistently resists such attempts to allegorize its domestic preoccupations by emphasizing the intimate nature of the household spaces it portrays and by underscoring the moral import of the characters' apparently unremarkable, even trite, negotiations.

Justice Shallow's opening lines are, for instance, often invoked as proof that the residents of Windsor are concerned primarily with issues of rank and juridico-political power:

Sir Hugh, persuade me not; I will make a Star
Chamber matter of it. If he were twenty Sir John

Falstaffs, he shall not abuse Robert Shallow,
esquire.

(I.i.1-4)

Picking up on Justice Shallow's insistent use of honorifics here, Ralph Berry has argued that Shallow's outrage at Falstaff should be read as the dramatization of a tension between Windsor's middle-class values and the aristocratic concerns represented by Falstaff the knight.¹⁸

While Shallow is certainly angry, I would argue that his ire is presented as the direct result of Falstaff's personal attacks rather than as the representative response of the town of Windsor to the knight's courtly status. Justice Shallow is clearly intent on seeing Falstaff punished, but it quickly becomes obvious that the knight's crimes are not the stuff of which Star Chamber cases are made. The justice appears to have a legitimate complaint-- "you have beaten my men, kill'd my deer, and broke open my lodge," he accuses Falstaff (I.i.111-12)--but these offenses cannot be counted among either the serious abuses of power by nobility and gentry or the riots and unlawful assemblies customarily brought before England's highest civil court. It also becomes clear that Shallow, despite his repeated threats, has no intention of taking Falstaff to court. His deer have been poached and his pride has been injured, but

¹⁸Ralph Berry, *Shakespeare and Social Class* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1988), 50-51.

these are local matters, and Shallow finally seems less eager to seek formal legal redress for his injustices than to complain loudly to his neighbours about the indignities he has suffered.

As the focus of dramatic attention shifts from Shallow's threat to bring a public suit against Falstaff before "The Council" (I.i.117) to the distinctly parochial mock trial of Bardolph, Pistol, and Nym, the quest for justice undergoes a comic process of domestication. Indeed Shallow's rather serious concerns are largely forgotten in the excitement generated by his cousin Slender's sordid tale of drunkenness and robbery. Quickly assembling themselves into the parodic equivalent of a Star Chamber tribunal, Parson Evans, Master Page, and the Host of the Garter Inn assume the roles of "umpires" to "hear" the matter of Slender vs. Falstaff et al. "and end it between them" (I.i.143). This hastily convened jury of townsfolk allows Slender to recount the details of his cozenage, thereby reestablishing the boundaries of acceptable behaviour in the Windsor community. Like Justice Shallow, Slender seems content with this opportunity to air his grievances and he is quick to forget about such legal matters when Anne Page arrives with her mother to welcome both accuser and accused in to dinner.

Rather than noting the play's tendency to diffuse tensions between the Windsorites and their visitors by

domesticating conflict through the intervention of the household, however, Berry reads Shallow's complaint as a "prologue to the Wives," and goes on to argue that the play's primary goal is to dramatize conflict between the city and the country:

At the core of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is a conflict between the metropolis and the provinces, between city and town. Falstaff brings his city sophistication and rank to Windsor, hoping to make a killing on the local exchange. The Wives, bridling, affirm middle-class morality against the blandishments of the knighthood. This is the only play in the canon grounded in the middle classes, and it presents a collision of values and rank in which Falstaff comes off badly worsted.¹⁹

Although Falstaff arrives in Windsor announcing confidently his ability to "predominate over the peasant[s]" of Windsor (II.ii.282), I am unconvinced by Berry's claim that an allegorized battle between urban and rural (or upper- and middle-class) ways of life is at the heart of *Merry Wives*.²⁰ Instead, I want to suggest that while class and

¹⁹Berry, *Shakespeare and Social Class*, 50.

²⁰Berry seems to assume that the binaries metropolis/provinces, city/town, and upper-class/middle-class can operate interchangeably. While this seems to me a questionable assumption, I am more concerned to refute his larger claim that the play is primarily a dramatization of universalizable class conflict rather than an exploration of the role of the household in community life.

gender are the two prominent social faultlines along which Falstaff divides his world, the knight's experiences in Windsor teach him that the household has the power to render these normative concepts functionally meaningless. Sir John's rigidly hierarchical thinking leads him to assume that as a knight, an Englishman, and a city-dweller he will have the wives of Windsor at his mercy. He is thus completely unprepared to meet the challenge presented by the clever Mistresses Ford and Page who, far from being disadvantaged by their roles as middle-class women living in the country, are instead able instead to draw strength from the authority invested in them as wives and mistresses of their own houses in order to teach Falstaff a lesson about respect.

I do not mean by my challenge to Berry's reading to suggest that the characters of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* are not acutely attuned to matters of social station and propriety. Indeed they are. Rather, my concern is to emphasize that such issues as class are understood as important specifically for the ways in which they impact upon the households that are the primary focus of the play's action. In other words, I want to stress that in Windsor a preoccupation with status need not entail an interest in the public over and against the domestic sphere.

Master Page, for example, is concerned by the prospect of his daughter, Anne, marrying above her. "[H]e is of too

high a region," Page says of her suitor, Fenton (III.ii.73). While Page is obviously very much aware of the respective social standings of the men who seek to woo his daughter, his rigidity regarding class does not extend beyond the boundaries of his household. As Fenton explains to Anne, her father is worried that

I am too great of birth,
And that my state being gall'd with my expense,
I seek to heal it only by his wealth.
Besides these, other bars he lays before me,
My riots past, my wild societies,
And tells me 'tis a thing impossible
I should love thee but as a property.

(III.iv.4-10)

For Page, then, questions of social status are relevant because they have the potential to impact the welfare of his only daughter. Concerned that Fenton may be enamoured less with Anne herself than with thoughts of a dowry that would enable him to pay off debts incurred during his riotous youth at court, Page forbids their marriage. Social status figures in Page's domestic calculations not as an issue of personal pride or as some distant matter of formal precedence, but as a direct threat to Anne's happiness. Like any good father he wishes to protect his daughter from an unhappy match whose inequities threaten to leave her powerless at the hands of a cad who treats her like mere

"property." To read Page's preoccupation with class without considering the emphatically domestic nature of his concerns is to allegorize his experiences as husband and father to the point of rendering the particularities of his experience meaningless.

Although archetypal criticism appears at some distance on the methodological spectrum from Ralph Berry's brand of materialism, it too has sought to allegorize domestic experience as it is portrayed in *Merry Wives*. Insisting that various images, character types, patterns of action, and ritualized modes of social behaviour appear in the play as a reflection of a set of universal mental forms and patterns, myth critics have understood *Merry Wives*' focus on the household as veiled allegory rather than deliberate localizing strategy. Linking the play to various legends and folk rituals, numerous critics have read the punishing of Falstaff as a representation of that archetype of archetypes, the death/rebirth theme. This strand of criticism seems to have been initiated when Northrop Frye referred in passing to "an elaborate ritual of the defeat of winter known to folklorists as 'carrying out Death,' of which Falstaff is the victim." Frye went on, tongue firmly in cheek, to suggest that

. . . after being thrown into the water, dressed up as a witch and beaten out of a house with curses, and finally supplied with a beast's head

and singed with candles, he had done about all that could reasonably be asked of any fertility spirit.²¹

Despite Frye's observation that Falstaff had already endured more ritual abuse than is usually expected of the average fertility spirit, myth critics have since kept the portly knight busier than ever. The most popular of these archetypal readings casts Falstaff as the *pharmakos*, or scapegoat, who must be symbolically sacrificed in order that Windsor society might renew itself. Originally elaborated from Frye's comments by J. A. Bryant in the mid-1970s, this account of Falstaff's punishments as a means to collective psychic purging has appeared more recently in the work of Jan Lawson Hinely and G. Beiner.²²

While archetypal criticism itself has for the most part fallen out of fashion, the interest in folk culture that it nurtured continues to be felt in Shakespeare studies. A growing curiosity about the nature and substance of popular culture in the early modern period has, for instance, resulted in a resurgence of interest in contemporary folk

²¹Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), 183.

²²See J. A. Bryant, "Falstaff and the Renewal of Windsor," in *PMLA* 89 (1974): 296-301; Jan Lawson Hinely, "Comic Scapegoats and the Falstaff of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*," in *Shakespeare Studies* 15 (1982): 37-54; G. Beiner, "The Libido as *Pharmakos*, or The Triumph of Love: *The Merry Wives of Windsor* in the Context of Comedy," in *Orbis Litterarum* 43 (1988): 195-216.

customs and their relation to literature.²³ For Falstaff, this materialist preoccupation with community-based ritual has meant little more than a subtle change in emphasis; now the spectacle of his final humiliation at Herne's Oak warrants more attention than the earlier scenes of his ungainly escapes from the Ford household. Rather than the transhistorical and transcultural ritual of "casting out Death," the play is now said to figure the particular early modern practices of the charivari. This rite of festive abuse--in which a community enacts through burlesque its objection to inappropriate sexual behaviour²⁴--and its more specialized English cousin, the skimmington--in which a cuckold or henpecked husband is subjected to a series of farcical public torments--are significant features of the historical landscape against which recent criticism has argued *The Merry Wives of Windsor* must be read. The play has also been variously associated with the myth of Acteon and the pagan rites of Halloween.²⁵

²³See, for instance, the range of essays gathered in *True Rites and Maimed Rites: Ritual and Anti-Ritual in Shakespeare and his Age*, ed. Linda Woodbridge and Edward Berry (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992).

²⁴For discussions of the charivari see Natalie Zemon Davis, "The Reasons of Misrule: Youth Groups and Charivaris in Sixteenth Century France," *Past and Present* 50 (1971), 49-75, and David Underdown, *Revel, Riot, and Rebellion: Popular Politics and Culture in England 1603-1660* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 99-111.

²⁵See Jeanne Addison Roberts, *Shakespeare's English Comedy: "The Merry Wives of Windsor" in Context* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), 79-81.

At their best, such investigations into the material history of early modern folk culture as a source for literary representation are informative and thought provoking. Anne Parten's reading of Falstaff's final humiliation before Herne's Oak as a dramatization of the real-world shaming ritual of the skimmington, for example, encourages readers to understand Falstaff's horns as a complex symbol that paradoxically associates the lustful knight with both a transgressively aggressive male sexuality and an equally unacceptable subjection of masculinity.²⁶ Her work sheds important light on particular aspects of early modern cultural practice--the fact that household implements were traditionally employed to beat the men dressed in women's clothing who acted as symbolic victims of the charivari is especially fascinating for students of early modern householding, for instance (see figure 2). At the same time it enables new readings of sixteenth-century dramatic practice.

Although Parten's work maintains a firm focus on the domestic sphere, in its efforts to find real-world corollaries for dramatic representations, historical criticism more often looks to the public practices of royal courts, legal courts, and courts of public opinion rather than to the (admittedly hard to access) routines of the

²⁶See Anne Parten, "Falstaff's Horns: Masculine Inadequacy and Feminine Mirth in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*," in *Studies in Philology* 82.2 (1985): 184-99.



William Hogarth, *Skimmington*.
A cavalcade of cuckolds. Some
wear horns, others carry dis-
reputable items, while
marching to the sound of horns
and the rhythm of a cauldron.
(Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale.)

figure 2

household. Like the political critics for whom Falstaff functions as representative of courtly/urban values, the myth critics for whom he operates as purgatory fertility spirit, or the psychoanalytic critics for whom he acts as symbol of universalizable masculinity,²⁷ historical critics tend, when confronted by *Merry Wives*' markedly domestic focus, to ignore its particulars and to downplay its prosaic details in favour of a discussion what Alfred Harbage has called "larger affairs of state."²⁸ This preoccupation with the public sphere has also prevailed, as Leah Marcus has recently noted, among the play's editors.²⁹ In the course of her comparison of the quarto and folio texts of

²⁷Coppélia Kahn, for instance, argues that the knight becomes an emblem for a universal notion of masculine vulnerability and virility, an Everyman who functions as both cuckold and cuckold-maker. See *Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 150, and Parten, "Falstaff's Horns," 196.

²⁸Alfred Harbage, *Shakespeare and the Rival Traditions* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 235. In his seminal work on sixteenth-century domestic drama, Henry Adams describes domestic tragedy as "a tragedy of the common people, ordinarily set in the domestic scene, dealing with personal and family relationships rather than with large affairs of state, presented in a realistic fashion, and ending in a tragic or otherwise serious manner" (Henry Hitch Adams, *English Domestic or, Homiletic Tragedy, 1575-1642* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1943], 1-2). Although clearly a comedy rather than a tragedy, I would argue that *Merry Wives*, with its emphasis on the domestic as opposed to the public realm, convincingly fits the criteria of domestic drama.

²⁹See Leah S. Marcus, *Unediting the Renaissance: Shakespeare, Marlowe, Milton* (London: Routledge, 1996), 68-100, and "Levelling Shakespeare: Local Customs and Local Texts," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42 (1991): 168-78.

Merry Wives, Marcus exposes an editorial tradition that has systematically dismissed Q as a "bad" quarto by classifying it either as a memorial reconstruction of the 1623 First Folio, or as an incomplete and corrupt version of F. As Marcus explains, "among [Q's] perceived shortcomings is the fact that it 'lacks' the courtly associations that elevate its folio counterpart above the mundane, small-town concerns that otherwise dominate the play."³⁰

There is no doubt that English folk culture forms a particularly rich component of the frame of reference for *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. It is my contention, however, that all this local colour adds to, rather than detracts from, the play's domestic flavour. The play's margins are crowded with familiar figures of lore and legend: Will Scarlet, Little John, and the rest of Robin Hood's band of merry men (I.i.173) stand elbow to elbow with the "urchins, outhes, and fairies" (IV.iv.50) who dance in the moonlight of Windsor Forest. The play even offers up its own legends, adding Herne the Hunter and the witch of Brainford to this pantheon of traditional mythic figures. However, *Merry Wives* makes a point of domesticating these fabulous characters, thereby accentuating the ultimate ordinariness of even the most seemingly mythopoetic of its figures.

Consider, for instance, the demystifying effect of Falstaff's association of his unruly band of "cony-catching

³⁰Marcus, *Unediting*, 69.

rascals, Bardolph, Nym, and Pistol" (I.i.124-25) with the followers of romantic ballad-hero and outlaw Robin Hood. When Abraham Slender accuses Bardolph--"he in the red face" (I.i.170)--of having gotten him drunk and robbed him, Falstaff calls on his comrades to defend themselves: "What say you, Scarlet and John?" he asks (I.i.i.173). Falstaff's reference to Will Scarlet and Little John alludes primarily to Bardolph's red face, but the knight doubtless also hopes to cast a bit of flattering mythic light on his disreputable company by comparing them with Robin Hood's beloved companions. When this band of merry folk heroes famed for stealing from the rich in order to give to the poor assumes the all too human forms of Falstaff and his gang of raucous pickpockets, however, any sentimental glow is abruptly diffused. Legendary altruism is transformed into ordinary theft, and the effect is distinctly unflattering as these mythic figures materialize in the everyday world of Windsor.

Merry Wives exerts a similar demystificatory power over the Windsor fairies. Identified from the outset as a group of perfectly ordinary village children, the forest sprites are fully domesticated by Mistress Page and Mistress Ford, and their plans to frighten Falstaff. As the wives prepare his final punishment, Margaret Page exposes the mechanics of the theatrical illusion they will perform for the knight:

Nan Page (my daughter) and my little son,
 And three or four more of their growth, we'll
 dress
 Like urchins, ouphes, and fairies, green and
 white,
 With rounds of waxen tapers on their heads,
 And rattles in their hands.

(IV.iv.48-52)

Like Robin Hood and his men, the fairies are made flesh through their encounter with the ordinary world of Windsor. Rather than mythic, archetypal, or universal symbols, Falstaff's small tormentors are actual, and fully individuated, townsfolk. Anne and William Page, Mistress Quickly, and their neighbourhood friends are enlisted to participate in Falstaff's punishment, clothed in costumes designed and sewn by their parents, and armed with household objects to imitate the sounds and actions of fairies. What is stressed is the ordinariness of this scene. Like parents planning a school pageant, the citizens of Windsor search their houses for objects that can be transformed into fairy tools.

Herne the Hunter, *Merry Wives'* own legendary hero, is similarly demystified. The fearsome, chain-shaking blighter of trees and bewitcher of cattle, is, after all, none other than Sir John Falstaff, knight and would-be seducer. Even before he has assumed human form, Mistress Page has already

exposed the ostensibly fearsome figure as the product of a more gullible--she calls it "superstitious idle-headed" (IV.iv.36)--age. Mistress Page's demystification of this legendary figure is then fully literalized when Falstaff assumes the role of the horned spirit, proclaiming: "As I am a true spirit, welcome!" (V.v.29).

This pattern of constant literalization, in which even the most fabulous figures of folklore materialize as ordinary human beings, operates as a microcosm of the play's insistence on the power of the ordinary. Although early critics resisted the play's own impulse in this direction, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* consistently emphasizes its ordinariness.

II. Cursing Eve's Daughters

Despite their titular and narrative prominence, Alice Ford and Margaret Page, the merry wives of Shakespeare's only English comedy, have received remarkably short critical shrift. Their neglect can be ascribed in part to the immense popularity of their weighty opponent, Sir John Falstaff. Perhaps the most beloved of Shakespeare's characters--one editor calls him "the finest comic character the English stage had yet known or was perhaps ever to know"³¹--Falstaff has been the focus of much of the scant

³¹H. J. Oliver, "Introduction," to *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen and Company, 1971), lxv.

scholarly attention that has been devoted to *The Merry Wives of Windsor* over the years. Critics have long been intrigued by the probably apocryphal story that Queen Elizabeth (or, in another version of the story, her Lord Chamberlain) ordered Shakespeare to write a play about Falstaff in love.³² Since the turn of the eighteenth century this legend has spawned various occasionalist arguments, each claiming a definitive date for the composition and first performance of the play, and has funnelled a great deal of critical energy into discussions of the character of Falstaff. Ironically, however, rather than focusing attention on *Merry Wives* and mitigating criticism of its farcical nature, the resulting comparisons between the Windsor Falstaff with his namesake in the Henry plays have instead contributed to a dismissal of *Merry Wives* as an inferior comic cousin of the *Henriad*.

Consider, for instance, the following excerpt from Agnes Mure Mackenzie's 1924 account of *Merry Wives*:

I will swear to it that the true Falstaff never scuttled feebly from an intrigue in the disguise of last week's washing. He would have faced it out, and ended by getting the lady's husband to

³²According to Oliver this story first appeared in print in John Dennis's dedication of *The Comical Gallant* to George Granville in 1702 (see "Introduction," xliv). The account is repeated in Nicholas Rowe's 1709 editions of Shakespeare (see *The Works of Mr. William Shakespear*, 6 vols. [London, 1709], viii-ix).

ask him to dinner, and to put his best port out at that.

Never mind: if Gloriana knew no better than to ask for Falstaff turned amorist, she gave us the best rough-and-tumble farce there is in English.³³

Eager to defend "the true Falstaff" of the Henriad from the ignominies of his Windsor namesake, Mackenzie mounts an implicit attack on *Merry Wives* with its "feeble" characters and "rough-and-tumble" action. Mackenzie dismisses her own reservations about the cowardly behaviour of Windsor's lustful Knight of the Garter with a brisk and inimitably British "never mind," but there is no mistaking her disdain for the very notion of Falstaff "turned amorist."

While Mackenzie is prepared to forgive Shakespeare the creation of a counterfeit Falstaff and eagerly reclaims *Merry Wives* as the very best in farce, other critics have been less generous. Fifteen years earlier A. C. Bradley had described the play as a hasty farce in which Falstaff is "baffled, duped, and treated like dirty linen, beaten, burnt, pricked, mocked, insulted, and, worst of all, repentant and didactic." His final verdict: *The Merry Wives*

³³Agnes Mure Mackenzie, *The Women in Shakespeare's Plays: A Critical Study from the Dramatic and Psychological Points of View and in Relation to the Development of Shakespeare's Art* (London: William Heinemann, 1924), 108; Mackenzie's emphasis.

of *Windsor* is "horrible."³⁴ More than fifteen years after Mackenzie's comments, the critical tide had yet to turn. Mark Van Doren described the play as one in which Falstaff "makes a small [world] sad by being the butt of coarse-grained men and women who drag and buffet him about until the business grows as boring as a practical joke." The play, he said, "supplied what the convention and a queen demanded" but contained no sign of the author's "genius . . . or his love."³⁵

In his introduction to the 1971 Arden edition of the play, H. J. Oliver notes the tendency to focus on the relationship between *Merry Wives* and the Henry plays, and he seems aware that the comedy will seldom be favoured in such comparisons:

The question with which study of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* often begins, and the one with which it too often ends, is the relationship of the play to Shakespeare's *Henry IV* and *Henry V*; criticism, understandably enough, centres on Falstaff, and the issue most likely to be debated is whether the Falstaff of *The Merry Wives* is the authentic

³⁴See A. C. Bradley, "The Rejection of Falstaff," in *Oxford Lectures on Poetry*, 1909, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), 248.

³⁵Mark Van Doren, *Shakespeare*, 1939, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1953), 114, 118.

Falstaff, as the life-like character is assumed to be in the two parts of *Henry IV*.³⁶

Oliver's gentle complaint that much scholarly analysis of *Merry Wives* actually stops short of any real thinking about the play itself seems to me a legitimate one. What interests me most about his observations, however, is the assumption that Falstaff should remain unquestioned at the "centre" of critical discussion of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

This assumption that Falstaff is the protagonist of *Merry Wives* has continued to dominate among editors and critics alike. In her 1974 Riverside introduction to the play, for example, Anne Barton describes *The Merry Wives of Windsor* as "a comedy concerned . . . with the punishment of a knight whose principles and behavior contravene all the ideals of his rank."³⁷ Of course there is no contesting the facts offered by Barton's abbreviated plot summary. Falstaff does indeed try to seduce Mistress Ford and Mistress Page and his attempts do reveal him as an unprincipled scoundrel who is more than prepared to violate the chivalric code of his knightly order--William Harrison calls the order of the Garter "the most honorable in

³⁶H. J. Oliver, "Introduction," to *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *The Arden Shakespeare* (London: Methuen, 1971), vii.

³⁷Anne Barton, "Introduction to *The Merry Wives of Windsor*," in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans, et al., 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 320.

England"³⁸--when it suits him. Barton's passive construction, however, also betrays a clear bias by placing its grammatical emphasis firmly on Falstaff's broad shoulders: there is no mention here of the women who engineer Falstaff's punishment. This odd omission persists throughout Barton's introduction. She refers to the wives of the play's title only twice, mentioning once that Falstaff is tricked by "a pair of wives" and alluding once to Falstaff's "assault upon the virtue of Mistress Page and Mistress Ford."³⁹ The Windsor wives are never the subjects of a sentence much less of a paragraph.

I single out Barton's reading of *Merry Wives* not because it is unusual for its focus on Falstaff, but rather because it is representative. In her "new look" at *Merry Wives* Jeanne Addison Roberts too pays little mind to Mistress Ford and Mistress Page. Although Roberts identifies the play as a "true domestic drama, focused on marriage," her chapter on "Character" is entirely devoted to a discussion of Falstaff.⁴⁰ The editor of the 1990 Oxford edition not only assumes that Falstaff is the play's "central character," but goes on to argue that the knight has the "whole play to himself." Indeed Windsor's merry

³⁸William Harrison, *The Description of England*, ed. Georges Edelen (1587; Washington, DC: The Folger Shakespeare Library; New York: Dover, 1994), 103.

³⁹Barton, "Introduction," 322.

⁴⁰Roberts, *Shakespeare's English Comedy*, 84-118.

wives lose even their titular prominence in his introduction as their originally eponymous text is transformed into a "Falstaff play."⁴¹

More recent feminist critics might be expected to pay greater heed than their "old historicist" predecessors to the witty and creative women who so carefully control the action in *Merry Wives*. On the whole, however, they have shown remarkably little interest in the play and the effacement of Mistresses Page and Ford has continued. Only a handful of articles about *Merry Wives* have been published in recent years, and only a very few of these discuss Mistress Ford and Mistress Page at any length. Rosemary Kegl is more interested in issues of class and state authority than she is in issues of gender and women's authority and so focuses her discussion of insults and naming in the play on the characters of Shallow and Evans.⁴² Barbara Freedman's focus is primarily textual.⁴³ Elizabeth Pittenger's analysis of "mechanical reproduction" in *Merry Wives* takes Mistress Quickly as an exemplary

⁴¹T. W. Craik, "Introduction" to *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) 11, 14.

⁴²See Rosemary Kegl, "'The Adoption of Abominable Terms': The Insults the Shape Windsor's Middle Class," *English Literary History* 61.2 (1994): 253-78.

⁴³See Freedman, "Shakespearean Chronology."

figure," and Patricia Parker too focuses on the indomitable Quickly in her discussions of rhetorical strategizing in the play.⁴⁵

Falstaff's popularity--remarkable though it is, even today--cannot adequately account for such a complete critical marginalization of Mistresses Ford and Page. Following Camille Wells Slight in her intuition that "the dismissal of this play stems partly from critics' inability to accept middle-aged, middle-class women as heroines in a plot of sexual intrigue,"⁴⁶ I want to suggest more specifically that critics have tended to downplay the role of the merry wives' creative agency primarily because they both underestimate and devalue the importance of their role as wives throughout the play.

Peter Erickson, for instance, allows that "the most striking thing about the play is the role of the wives," but goes on to argue for an essentially conservative reading of *Merry Wives* that understands its celebration of female power

⁴⁴See Elizabeth Pittenger, "Dispatch Quickly: The Mechanical Reproduction of Pages," in *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42.4 (1991): 389-408.

⁴⁵See Patricia Parker, *Shakespeare from the Margins: Language, Culture, Context* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 116-48; "The Merry Wives of Windsor and Shakespearean Translation," in *Modern Language Quarterly* 52.2 (1991): 225-61; *Literary Fat Ladies: Rhetoric, Gender, Property* (London: Methuen, 1987), 27-31 and 69-77.

⁴⁶Camille Wells Slight, *Shakespeare's Comic Commonwealths* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 152.

as a means for obscuring some deeper pattern of patriarchal dominance and class stratification. Arguing that the play's "spirit is not progressive," Erickson contends that

the prevention of an orthodox, patriarchal ending by pervasive female dominance in this play should not . . . be construed as protofeminist insight or sympathy. As Madelon Sprengnether has pointed out, strong women are ultimately figured as maternal, and "matriarchal" is not equivalent to "feminist."⁴⁷

Erickson makes two important and interrelated claims here. The first posits that the disruption of an ostensibly traditional "festive" pattern of comic plot-structure culminating in patriarchal closure should not be read as the manifestation of a pro-feminist impulse. The second insists on a distinction between "strong women" with the authority to wield power in their families and wider civic communities, and women who recognize their own institutional discrimination and advocate its eradication.

This second distinction is a valuable one; as someone once said of Margaret Thatcher, "just because she's a powerful woman doesn't mean she's a sister." Its applicability to a reading of *Merry Wives* is unclear,

⁴⁷See Peter Erickson, "The Order of the Garter, the Cult of Elizabeth, and Class-Gender Tension in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*," in *Shakespeare Reproduced: The Text in History and Ideology*, ed. Jean E. Howard and Marion F. O'Connor (New York: Methuen, 1987), 117.

however. As Madelon Sprengnether herself insists in the article from which Erickson quotes, while a "matriarchal substratum . . . provides a rationale for the structure of male dominance in Shakespeare's tragedies," in the comedies "women more obviously wield power."⁴ As Sprengnether's own generic distinction highlights, the kind of material power exercised by Margaret Page and Alice Ford is denied to many of the female characters of Shakespearean tragedy. While powerful women in the tragedies may indeed be revealed as "radically untrustworthy,"⁵ in *Merry Wives* it is the representatives of patriarchal authority who are exposed as dangerously unprincipled and unreliable.

If "progressive spirit" and "protofeminist insight" for Erickson necessarily entail an overtly revolutionary agenda, *Merry Wives* cannot answer. Nevertheless, I would argue that a play whose primary representatives of patriarchy and court life are the madly jealous Master Ford and the felonious Sir John Falstaff cannot be convincingly claimed as politically or ideology conservative in any meaningful sense. As I demonstrate in the following section, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is dominated by a pair of witty women who are presented as competent decision-makers, loving and loyal

⁴Madelon Gohlke (Sprengnether), "'I wooed thee with my sword: Shakespeare's Tragic Paradigms,'" in *Representing Shakespeare: New Psychoanalytic Essays*, ed. Murray M. Schwartz and Coppélia Kahn (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 180.

⁵Sprengnether, "I wooed thee," 180.

wives, and vigorous defenders of their households. Unless friendship among women, fidelity in marriage, the acceptance of civic responsibility, and the condition of motherhood are all understood as essentially conservative practices and commitments--and I would argue that *Merry Wives* itself challenges such an understanding--the play cannot be dismissed as a farcical panegyric to court life.

* * *

Although critics seem unwilling to acknowledge their centrality, Mistress Ford and Mistress Page are clearly the prime movers in Windsor. Clever and quick-witted, the two friends expose Falstaff's plot to seduce them almost as soon as it is afoot. Together they devise a means of revenging themselves upon the treacherous knight and at the same time of protecting their households from the selfishly destructive designs of their courtly admirer. From the moment that they discover Falstaff's duplicity the action in Windsor is controlled by these two female characters. Creatively and confidently, Alice Ford and Margaret Page assert their authority as respectable citizens, responsible householders, loyal wives, and attractive women.

Upon first reading Sir John's love letter, Margaret Page is horrified by its effrontery:

What an unweigh'd behavior hath this Flemish
drunkard pick'd (with the devil's name!) out of my
conversation, that he dares in this manner assay

me? Why, he hath not been thrice in my company!
 What should I say to him? I was then frugal of my
 mirth. Heaven forgive me!

(II.i.22-28)

Embarrassed, she blames herself for Falstaff's unwelcome advances and wonders what she has done to encourage such unseemly behaviour. It is not long, however, before her shame turns to anger:

Why, I'll exhibit a bill in the parliament for the
 putting down of men. How shall I be reveng'd on
 him? for reveng'd I will be! as sure as his guts
 are made of puddings.

(II.i.28-32)

Having regained her composure and her self-confidence, Mistress Page begins to understand that Falstaff's proposition is the product of wishful thinking rather than the inevitable consequence of her own conduct. Fantasizing briefly about appearing before parliament to bring a bill against all men, she implicitly categorizes Falstaff's proposition as a form of gendered attack: in short, she recognizes his come-on as sexual harassment.

Mistress Page's consultations with Mistress Ford soon confirm her suspicion that Falstaff's advances are more generic than personal. "Letter for letter; but that the name of Page and Ford differs!" she announces upon comparing Alice's *billet doux* with her own,

To thy great comfort in this mystery of ill opinions, here's the twin-brother of thy letter;. . . I warrant he hath a thousand of these letters, writ with blank space for different names (sure, more!); and these are of the second edition. He will print them, out of doubt; for he cares not what he puts into the press, when he would put us two.

(II.i.70-79)

Mistress Page and her friend are offended by both the generality and the specificity of Falstaff's attempt at seduction. It is clear to both women that the knight has not fallen in love with any feature particular to either of them; each has met him only briefly, has consulted her conscience regarding any "unweigh'd behavior" that might have sent him confusing signals, and has finally cleared herself of any lascivious conduct (II.i.22-28; I.i.84-89). Both women find Falstaff's impersonal lust and brazenly mechanical attempts to woo them two at a time deeply insulting. At the same time, however, they understand Falstaff's unwanted advances as personal attacks on their married chastity; "What doth he think of us?" demands the horrified Mistress Ford (II.i.83).

Falstaff's attempts at seduction also risk unleashing more than simply the combined fury of the Windsor wives.

Mistress Ford worries about her husband learning of Falstaff's game:

Nay, I will consent to act any villainy against him, that may not sully the chariness of our honesty. O that my husband saw this letter! it would give eternal food to his jealousy.

(II.i.98-101)

Thus for Windsor's merry wives there is more at stake in Falstaff's adulterous proposals than private slight. Public dishonour and marital discord also threaten to undo the relative harmony of their domestic lives.

Once they have exposed Falstaff's plot to seduce them, Mistresses Ford and Page initiate a plot of their own to punish the knight for assuming them willing to "thrust virtue out of [their] hearts by the head and shoulders" (V.v.147-48). Rather than seeking some formal redress for their wrongs, or allowing their husbands to exact some vengeance for them, the wives undertake their own defence. This remarkably independent decision is prefigured by Falstaff's descriptions of both Mistress Ford and Mistress Page as figures of economic authority in Windsor.

Falstaff gives us our first glimpse of the Windsor wives, and it is he who first emphasizes the authority that these women wield. While devising a plan to "cony-catch" his way out of financial difficulty, Falstaff explains that Mistress Ford and Mistress Page are the real financiers of

Windsor. Speaking first of Alice, Falstaff identifies her as the financial authority in the Ford household: "Now, the report goes," Falstaff tells his companions, "she has all the rule of her husband's purse" (I.iii.52-53). Later in the play Falstaff confirms Alice's role as ruler of the Ford purse when he refers to her as "the key" to her husband's coffer (II.ii.274). Master Ford may have "masses of money," but it is his wife who is "well-favor'd" for it (II.ii.271-73). Falstaff's comments about Margaret Page similarly acknowledge her role as a financial manager. Describing her as "a region in Guiana, all gold and bounty," Falstaff declares that Margaret "bears the purse" in the Page family (I.iii.68-69).

Falstaff's sexist colonialist discourse objectifies the Windsor wives by figuring them as foreign lands, as distant others waiting to be discovered and exploited through trade. Mistress Ford and Mistress Page "shall be my East and West Indies," he announces, "and I will trade to them both" (I.iii.69-72). Nevertheless, his image of commercial barter also insists that it is the wives and mothers who control the purse strings in this merchant town. Casting the women as economic entities with whom he seeks to establish trade rather than as commodities to be bartered or exchanged--a more common version of this colonialist trope--Falstaff emphasizes that the wives wield considerable economic authority in Windsor.

Falstaff dwells on the wives' roles as "exchequers" of Windsor (I.iii.71), and he also emphasizes them as sexual beings capable both of experiencing desire and of exciting desire in others. Mistress Quickly is doubtless exaggerating when she describes for Falstaff the legions of other "knights, and lords, and gentlemen, with their coaches" who have come to woo Mistress Ford with "coach after coach, letter after letter, gift after gift" (II.ii.63-64; 65-66), but her fanciful litany of failed attempts to seduce Windsor's faithful matron reminds the knight and the play's audience that Alice Ford can both attract suitors and withstand pressures to betray her husband. Certainly Falstaff's soliloquy under Herne's Oak in Act Five makes it clear that the middle-aged women of Windsor have inspired real passion in him:

Now the hot-bloodied gods assist me! 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.
 You were also, Jupiter, a swan for the love of
 Leda. O omnipotent love, how near the god drew to
 the complexion of a goose! A fault done first in
 the form of a beast (O Jove, a beastly fault!) and
 then another fault in the semblance of a fowl--
 think on't, Jove, a foul fault! When gods have
 hot backs, what shall poor men do? For me, I am

here a Windsor stag, and the fattest, I think i'
th' forest. Send me a cool rut-time, Jove, or who
can blame me to piss my tallow? Who comes here?
My doe?

(V.v.2-15)

Falstaff's breathless and exclamatory speech clearly reveals how terribly exciting he finds the notion of a nocturnal tryst with Mistress Ford. Despite such clear evidence of the sexual passion aroused in the knight by the merry wives, however, many recent critics refuse to acknowledge Alice Ford and Margaret Page as romantic targets, preferring instead to understand Falstaff's attempts at seduction merely as cover for his plan to fleece them financially. Jan Lawson Hinely, for instance, argues that Falstaff's interest in Mistress Ford and Mistress Page is "solely mercenary" and thus an abuse of "healthy sexuality."⁵⁰ Oddly, however, as evidence that the knight is more interested in money than in sexual favours, Hinely cites the play's numerous references to Falstaff's "age and state of physical decay."⁵¹ Hinely's assumption that Falstaff is too old and too decrepit to experience sexual desire (she refers to Falstaff's "total unfitness" for the role of

⁵⁰Jan Lawson Hinely, "Comic Scapegoats and the Falstaff of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*," *Shakespeare Studies* 15 (1982), 42.

⁵¹Hinely, "Comic Scapegoats," 42.

suitors⁵²) mirrors the more common critical assumption that the merry wives are themselves powerless to experience or to excite sexual desire. Convinced that older characters cannot possibly be interested in sex, critics tend to read past Falstaff's sexualized invocation of the hot-blooded Jove--clear evidence that the knight has sexual, not commercial, relations in mind--and the play's insistence that the married chastity of Mistresses Ford and Page is at stake, and continue to maintain that Falstaff's goals are merely pecuniary.

Alice Ford and Margaret Page are presented both as sexually attractive women and responsible householders with charge of Windsor's domestic coffers. It is also clear that they control more than simply the purse strings in their respective households. As the scurried preparations for Falstaff's first punishment demonstrate, the women are also fully in command of a range of servants. Indeed the success of their plot against Sir John relies on their ability to extract obedience from those in their employ:

Mrs. Ford. What, John! What, Robert!

Mrs. Page. Quickly, quickly! Is the buck-basket--

Mrs. Ford. I warrant. What, Robin, I say!

Enter SERVANTS with a great buck-basket.

Mrs. Page. Come, come, come.

Mrs. Ford. Here, set it down.

⁵²Hinely, "Comic Scapegoats," 42.

Mrs. Page. Give your men the charge, we must be brief.

Mrs. Ford. Marry, as I told you before, John and Robert, be ready here hard by in the brew-house, and when I suddenly call you, come forth, and (without any pause or staggering) take this basket on your shoulders. That done, trudge with it in all haste, and carry it among the whitsters in Datchet-mead, and there empty it in the muddy ditch close by the Thames side.

Mrs. Page. You will do it?

Mrs. Ford. I ha' told them over and over, they lack no direction. Be gone, and come when you are call'd.

Exeunt Servants.

(III.iii.1-20)

This scene provides a colourful picture of early modern home life, offering audiences a sense of the physical architecture of the Ford household (with its adjacent brew-house within shouting distance), as well as a glimpse of the internal workings of its personnel arrangements. At the centre of this domestic superstructure is Alice Ford, who instructs, commands, and reminds her servants of the roles they are to play in the drama she and Margaret Page have

devised. Clearly accustomed to receiving her orders, the servants do as they are told without comment.

While we do not see Mistress Page exercising such matriarchal authority in her own home, she too is presented as a woman accustomed to directing domestic action. To prepare for Falstaff's first punishment, for instance, she takes on the task of enlisting the support of Falstaff's page to lure the knight to the Ford household. Befriending young Robin with pleasant chat, Margaret bribes him with the promise of a new outfit in order to secure his assistance and his silence: "This secrecy of thine shall be a tailor to thee, and shall make thee a new doublet and hose" (III.iii.33-35).

While critics have long been aware of Mistress Ford and Mistress Page's effective control of events in Windsor, there has been little discussion of the source the wives' power. The scenes in which they transform the Ford household into a trap for the unwitting Falstaff emphasize that the source of the wives' authority--their warrant--lies in their respective roles as Windsor matriarchs. As I explained in Chapter One, managing a household was seen as a valuable contribution in early modern England. While domestic administration was considered the purview of the master of the household, both theoretical (read: theological) and practical concerns allowed some degree of authority to devolve upon the wives and mothers who often

had charge of the day-to-day management of the household. In *The World We Have Lost*, Peter Laslett describes the establishment of a new household in terms of the rewards this process offered to both men and women: "It gave the man full membership in the community and to the woman something to run; she became mistress of a household--as the French put it, *Maitresse de la maison*."⁵³ Marriage and the inauguration of a new household conferred a measure of civic authority on both husband and wife, as Laslett suggests, but the full implications of the new moral and political emphasis on marriage affected men and women differently. For men, getting married and establishing a household of their own meant assuming what had become, as Michael Walzer notes, a crucial, if unofficial, civic office.⁵⁴ Patricia Crawford sums up the early modern attitudes toward men's and women's roles succinctly:

Increasingly, the citizen was a responsible adult male, head of his household, with duties to his country, his prince, and his God. Ideally, a woman was a good wife and mother. She did not belong in the public sphere because her weakness incapacitated her for public duties. Early modern

⁵³Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost: Further Explored*, 3rd ed. (London: Methuen, 1983), 101.

⁵⁴Michael Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics* (New York: Atheneum, 1976), 49, 55.

housewives were, precisely, wives, and as such they were consistently denied access to the sites of broader political and economic decision-making.⁵⁵

The evidence of material history and of contemporary conduct books confirms that men derived substantially more public freedom than women did from such domestic arrangements. Nevertheless, some power devolved on women responsible for running households, and, like Alice Ford and Margaret Page, these women found that the role of "maitresse de la maison" granted them a measure of financial, social, and emotional authority.

I use the term "authority" advisedly here. As Constance Jordan has pointed out, much feminist debate about women in the family focuses on the difference between power and authority:

Defenders of women point to the fact that women have power within the family and indeed in larger social settings; what they lack is the authority--the title, the office--to give that power a public

⁵⁵Patricia Crawford, "Public Duty, Conscience, and Women in Early Modern England" in *Public Duty and Private Conscience in Seventeenth-Century England*, ed. John Morrill, Paul Slack, and Daniel Woolf (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 59.

and institutional character. They persuade but they cannot rule.⁵⁶

This is precisely the distinction upon which much feminist criticism of Shakespeare's female characters is based. While critics often ascribe a kind of counter-culture power to figure like Alice Ford and Margaret Page, they are less likely to recognize these female characters as bearers of authority. The problematic assumption undergirding such arguments is that authority necessarily derives from the restricted institutions of the public sphere. In other words, despite their laudable aim of identifying and challenging the systematic oppression of women such arguments fail to recognize the household--the primary institution of the private sphere--as a possible source of authority for women.

As I have demonstrated throughout this chapter, the merry wives wield economic, sexual, and social power in Windsor. Even more importantly, however, Alice Ford and Margaret Page bear the authority--the warrant--needed to legitimate this power and its exercise in the broader community. By disciplining Falstaff, the wives demonstrate that the authority of the household can challenge the twin powers of wealth and class, powers without sufficient authority to legitimate them in Windsor. I do not mean to

⁵⁶Constance Jordan, *Renaissance Feminism: Literary Texts and Political Models* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 4.

suggest that because the play explores the effects of household authority on the public sphere that *Merry Wives* is somehow proto-democratic; in the world of the play, as in the early modern England the play purports to depict, the household functions according to a patriarchal system that understands the husband as the natural head of the family and the civic community as the aggregate of all the male heads of the community. Nevertheless, *Merry Wives* does insist that women can derive some authority from their roles as wives and mothers, and that such authority can impact upon life in the public sphere. This domestic authority cannot be equated with the free exercise of political power in the public sphere, but neither should it be allowed to be subsumed completely into analyses of commercial or civic authority.

I move in the following chapter from the crowded domestic interiors of Windsor to the isolation of island life in *The Tempest*. Again, my focus is the relationship between domestic authority and the exercise of public power. While some of the material specificity of the early comedies disappears in *The Tempest*, the affective relations of the household continue to dominate the action, and I argue below that the complexities of relationships between father and daughter, master and servant, husband and wife provide the dramatic tension that gives the play its shape and energy.

I have argued that *Merry Wives* sets up an encounter between on the one hand Falstaff's vision of a world ruled by class and gender hierarchies and dominated by display of public power, and on the other the wives' vision of the same world dominated instead by a private domain capable of affecting life in the public sphere. Like Margaret Page and Alice Ford, Miranda finds strength and a measure of authority within the strictures of a social and political system governed by relations of dominance and deference. Using the work of late-Romantic Anna Jameson--arguably the first feminist critic of Shakespeare--as a springboard for a re-evaluation of Miranda, I contend that past and present readings of *The Tempest* alike have misread the play by emphasizing the exploitative nature of Prospero's relationship to his island paradise without considering the alternative models of selfhood, moral agency, and community life posited by the magician's daughter.

Jameson's reading of *The Tempest* provides an antidote to a nineteenth-century tradition that understood Miranda merely as a trope for a feminized conception of nature, and to a more recent materialist tradition that conceives of her merely as an unwitting object of exchange in a matrix of colonial and nuptial economies. Marilyn Williamson has argued that Shakespeare's last plays mythologize patriarchal power, "making its structures seem innocent, making them virtually disappear into a providential cosmos and the most

natural of power relationships, the family."⁵⁷ I contend instead that the naturalization of the patriarchal power dynamics of the household has been effected by its critics rather than by the Shakespearean play-text itself.

⁵⁷Marilyn L. Williamson, *The Patriarchy of Shakespeare's Comedies* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1986), 112.

Chapter Four

Dynasty versus Domesticity in *The Tempest*

In 1981 Jean Elshtain issued a plea that political philosophy recognize the agency of women as a valid focus of study. She wrote:

The feminist political thinker aims to transform her discipline as well as her social world in important ways. This necessitates locating the woman as subject of political and social inquiry, moving away from the abstracted, disembodied "product" of social forces featured in much contemporary social science. This female subject, as the object of inquiry, must be approached as an active agent of a life-world of intense personalization and immediacy.¹

Almost twenty years later, this chapter takes up Elshtain's call in a literary context and suggests that the history of *Tempest* criticism stands as powerful proof that political criticism of Shakespearean drama has yet to devise a solid

¹Jean Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 304.

theoretical basis from which to approach female characters as dynamic participants in the fictional worlds of which they are constitutive members. I argue that while as early as 1832, Anna Brownell Jameson--that late daughter of Romanticism--was taking the first brave steps toward acknowledging Prospero's daughter as both a valid subject of inquiry and an active agent in the world of the play, more recent critics have failed to follow through on Jameson's feminist project. Further, I argue that this failure has broad-reaching moral and political implications which must be addressed if materialist criticism is to fulfil its emancipatory promise.

Anna Jameson's contribution to nineteenth-century character criticism, *Shakspeare's Heroines*, first appeared in 1832.² Jameson's study, which takes as its subject twenty-five of Shakespeare's female protagonists, is the first substantial and systematic discussion of these characters on record. The book's impressive publication record testifies to its popularity: it was reprinted at least eighteen times before 1925.³ While she was well-

²Although best known under this title, Jameson's book was originally published as *Characteristics of Women, Moral, Poetical, and Historical*.

³See Christy Desmet, "'Intercepting the Dew-Drop': Female Readers and Readings in Anna Jameson's Shakespearean Criticism" in *Women's Re-Visions of Shakespeare: On the Responses of Dickinson, Woolf, Rich, H.D., George Eliot, and Others*, ed. Marianne Novy (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 41n.

respected by her contemporaries--Shakespeare enthusiasts and reviewers alike ranked her criticism with that of renowned scholars such as William Hazlitt, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Friedrich Schlegel--Jameson has since been relegated to the margins of Shakespeare criticism.

Although published in a year best known to students of literature as the traditional end date of Romanticism, *Shakspeare's Heroines* is a markedly Romantic text. Nowhere is this critical debt more apparent than in Jameson's discussion of Miranda. Her prose is embellished with elaborate conceits yoking Miranda with the natural world--at one point she describes Miranda's bashfulness as the "self-folding of a flower"⁴--and her argument seems rooted in an essentialist vision of womanliness--she talks about Miranda's "woman's heart" as "unalterable and inalienable" (150). "Had [Shakespeare] never created Miranda," Jameson announces, "we should never have been made to feel how completely the purely natural and the purely ideal can blend into each other." She continues:

The character of Miranda resolves itself into the very elements of womanhood. She is beautiful, modest, and tender, and she is these only; they comprise her whole being, external and internal.

⁴Anna Jameson, *Shakspeare's Heroines* (London: George Bell, 1900), 151. All subsequent quotations of Jameson are from this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.

She is so perfectly unsophisticated, so delicately refined, that she is all but ethereal. (148-49)

For Jameson then, Miranda is the perfect exemplar of that most Romantic of ideals, the natural woman. Apparently refined from birth rather than educated to decorous behaviour, Miranda is a kind of Rousseauian paragon, unsullied by artifice and untouched by cultural sophistication. At one point Jameson calls her a "pure child of nature" (149).

If Jameson's rhetoric is conventionally Romantic, however, her argument about Miranda is not. In fact her very decision to discuss Miranda at all marks a departure from traditional Romantic criticism of Shakespeare. Jameson's contemporaries tend to relegate Miranda to the sidelines, choosing to focus instead on Prospero as a figure of poetical genius and on Caliban as the usurped duke's primitive antithesis. Even later nineteenth-century critics, many of whom took particular interest in Shakespeare's female characters, are less likely to discuss Miranda than they are Prospero and Caliban.

As a glance at the history of *Tempest* criticism will demonstrate, Jameson's reading of the play is remarkable because it emphasizes Miranda's role as an independent human agent and thereby locates the centre of the play in the character of Miranda rather than in the figure of her father. As I argue throughout this chapter, Jameson's

reading of *Miranda* also provides the means to reassess some of the assumptions that undergird more recent materialist (read: new historicist, feminist, and post-colonial) interpretations of *The Tempest*, interpretations which inadvertently silence the duke of Milan's daughter by ignoring the domestic elements of the play in favour of its dynastic preoccupations.

I. *The Tempest* and the Critical Tradition

Sentimental readings of *The Tempest* reigned throughout the eighteenth and well into the nineteenth century. Most critics seemed to agree that Shakespeare's last play was a complex allegory in which a series of archetypal binary opposites--nature/culture, instinct/reason, savage/civilized man--vie for supremacy. From Nicholas Rowe's 1709 pronouncement that Prospero's magic had "something in it very solemn and poetical"⁵ to William Hazlitt's 1817 characterization of him as a "stately magician,"⁶ critics emphasized Prospero's dignity and intellect, discovering in Shakespeare's princely necromancer a model of patriarchal wisdom and refined authority.

Toward the end of the first half of the nineteenth century the idea that *The Tempest* was Shakespearean

⁵Nicholas Rowe, *The Works of Mr. William Shakespear*, 6 vols. (London. 1709), 1:xxiii.

⁶William Hazlitt, *Characters of Shakespear's Plays* (London: Dent, 1906), 89.

autobiography gained currency. Arguing that the play was Shakespeare's farewell to the stage, Thomas Cambell claimed that the playwright had created in the character of the majestic and magical Prospero a flattering version of himself. This autobiographical reading of the play in turn lent especial force to critical constructions of Prospero as a basically virtuous, albeit occasionally misguided, philosopher-king.⁷

By contrast, Caliban--the island's original inhabitant--appears most often in the readings of nineteenth-century critics as an unregenerate brute, naturally resistant to his master's attempts to educate and to civilize him. In accordance with an earlier tradition of primitivism that idealized the figure of the noble savage, critics did periodically attempt to recuperate Shakespeare's "salvage and deformed slave"⁸ by depicting him as an uncorrupted innocent destined to follow his own uncontrollable instinctual urges. In *Characters of Shakspear's Plays*, for instance, Hazlitt associates Caliban with the "earthy" elements of nature:

⁷See Stephen Orgel, "Introduction" to *The Tempest*, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 10.

⁸This phrase stands as Caliban's descriptor in the First Folio of 1623, although there is no evidence to determine whether it is Shakespeare's own or whether it was inserted later by Folio editors.

Shakespear has described the brutal mind of Caliban in contact with the pure and original forms of nature; the character grows out of the soil where it is rooted, uncontrouled [sic], uncouth and wild, uncramped by any of the meannesses of custom. It is "of the earth, earthy." It seems almost to have been dug out of the ground, with a soul instinctively superadded to it answering to its wants and origin.'

While on Hazlitt's account Caliban's connectedness to the "original forms of nature" lends him a kind of wild purity, this is hardly an association to be envied. Although free of the "meannesses of custom," Hazlitt's "natural" Caliban is barely human, his soul apparently tacked on to an earthy body and a brutal mind merely as a divine afterthought. Such recuperative readings may have understood Prospero's attempts to acculturate Caliban as in some respects destructive, but they continued to cast Prospero as a civilized creative genius and Caliban as a savage beast.

On the subject of Miranda, these critics are notably silent. When she is mentioned at all, Miranda appears either as an archetype of pliant womanliness--I am thinking here of Mary Shelley's use of Miranda as a model for Ethel

'Hazlitt, *Characters of Shakespear's Plays*, 90. Cf. Coleridge's claim that Caliban is "in some respects a noble being: the poet has raised him far above contempt," (Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. T.M. Raysor, 2 vols [London: Dent, 1960], 2:178).

in *Lodore*¹⁰--or as an allegorical, sentimentalized figure for the tender and fecund aspects of untamed nature.¹¹ In *Notes Upon Some of Shakespeare's Plays*, for instance, the Victorian actor Fanny Kemble characterizes Caliban as a "gross and uncouth but powerful savage" and associates him with "the more ponderous and unwieldy natural elements," while arguing that the play's young lovers are symbols of nature's undomesticated bounty.¹² Miranda and Ferdinand are, she says:

lovely representations of those natural emotions of tender sentiment and passionate desire which, watched and guided and guarded by the affectionate solicitude and paternal prudence of Prospero, are pruned of their lavish luxuriance and supported in their violent weakness by the wise will that teaches forbearance and self-control as the only

¹⁰See Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Lodore* (1835), ed. Lisa Vargo (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 1997), 79, 155. In the appendices to this edition, Vargo cites discussions of Miranda by Jameson and Mary Wollstonecraft as sources for Shelley's novel (see Appendix B: Selected Literary Sources, n.2 *The Tempest* and Mary Wollstonecraft, from "Preface," *The Female Reader* [1797] and Appendix D: Domesticity and Female Education, n.4 Anna Jameson, from *Characteristics of Women* [1832]).

¹¹Sentimental romanticizations of Miranda were particularly popular on stage throughout the nineteenth century. One contemporary photograph shows Mrs. F. R. Benson as a delicately pensive Miranda, draped in a flowing white gown and posed at the edge of both forest and sea. See figure 3.

¹²Fanny Kemble, *Notes Upon Some of Shakespeare's Plays* (London: R. Bentley, 1882), 132-33.



H. J. Whitlock, Photo.

MIRANDA
(MRS. F. R. BENSON)

figure 3

price at which these exquisite flowers of existence may unfold their blossoms in prosperous beauty, and bear their rightful harvest of happiness as well as pleasure.¹³

Driven by the breathless, alliterative momentum of Kemble's sentimental prose, Miranda--like a Shakespearean Daphne--is transformed into a flowering tree. As a symbol of Prospero's personal and political lineage Miranda must, Kemble's image implies, be nourished, pruned, and cross-pollinated with Ferdinand (son of Prospero's enemy the king of Naples) if there is to be hope for a peaceful future harvest.

Like many of her contemporaries, Kemble emblemizes Miranda while reserving for Prospero a more central authoritative role in her account of *The Tempest*. Earlier in the same essay Kemble explains that

Prospero is to me the representative of wise and virtuous manhood, in its true relation to the combined elements of existence--the physical powers of the external world, and the varieties of character with which it comes into voluntary, accidental, or enforced contact. . . . Of the wonderful chain of being, of which Caliban is the densest and Ariel the most ethereal extreme, Prospero is the middle link. He--the wise and

¹³Kemble, *Notes*, 134-35.

good man--is the ruling power, to whom the whole series is subject.¹⁴

In this passage Kemble explicitly constructs Prospero as the physical and moral centre of *The Tempest*. She then both celebrates and naturalizes his centrality through her image of the magician as the "middle link" in a "wonderful chain of being."

Reacting in part to such characterizations of Prospero's autocratic rule as essentially benign, much recent criticism has sought means of critiquing what it reads as a glorification of *The Tempest's* exploitative colonialism. Rereading Caliban against traditional views of his savagery and ineducability, these modern readers have undertaken the crucial step of querying the play's relation to British imperialism in both the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries. Like the nineteenth-century critics they seek to challenge, however, these contemporary scholars dispense with discussions of Miranda in favour of analyses of the politically and culturally charged confrontation between Prospero and Caliban.

Readings of *The Tempest* in "the discourse of colonialism" began in earnest in North America with the publication of Stephen Greenblatt's influential 1976 essay

¹⁴Kemble, *Notes*, 132.

"Learning to Curse."¹⁵ Since then Greenblatt's post-colonialist project has been adopted and adapted in articles by Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, Paul Brown, Stephen Orgel, and Eric Cheyfitz, among others.¹⁶ While these recent commentators on the play define their political and interpretive projects against the sentimentalized readings of their eighteenth- and nineteenth-century predecessors, their treatment of Miranda bears some important similarities to this earlier tradition. Not unlike the nineteenth century's habit of allegorizing Miranda, post-colonial readings of *The Tempest* that seek to emphasize the exploitative nature of Prospero's relationship to his island paradise have a tendency to exclude Miranda by focusing on the magician's enslavement of Caliban and the play's spirits. This new critical orthodoxy often presents Miranda not as emblematic of the natural world, however, but as a cipher, a figure important only for her unwitting role in helping to realize her father's political aspirations.

Miranda does not fare much better at the hands of recent feminist critics. Although occasionally more sympathetic to her situation, contemporary feminist readers

¹⁵Stephen Greenblatt, "Learning to Curse" in *First Images of America: The Impact of the New World on the Old*, ed. Fredi Chiappelli et al., 2 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976): 561-80.

¹⁶For an account of the most notable of these see Ben Ross Schneider, Jr., "'Are We Being Historical Yet?': Colonialist Interpretations of Shakespeare's *Tempest*," *Shakespeare Studies* 23 (1995): 120-45.

of *The Tempest* also appear reluctant to focus attention on Prospero's daughter, often preferring instead to discuss female characters who are either marginal to the action of the play or absent entirely from its narrative. Caliban's dead mother Sycorax, Alonso's daughter Claribel, and the various female spirits who dance attendance on Prospero, for instance, all figure prominently in a variety of recent articles about the play. One contemporary critic even writes at some length about what she refers to as the play's "most significant absence of all, that of Caliban's Woman, of Caliban's physiognomically complementary mate . . . the ontologically absent, potential genetrix."¹⁷

When feminist critics do elect to discuss the play's only human female presence, Miranda appears in their commentaries most often as a prototype of that unlikely invention of Puritan conduct-books and late-twentieth-century scholars: the woman who is chaste, silent, and obedient. Small wonder then that feminist scholar and teacher Ann Thompson should discover that many twentieth-century female students of *The Tempest* find Miranda "an extremely feeble heroine and scorn to identify with her."¹⁸

¹⁷Sylvia Wynter, "Beyond Miranda's Meanings: Un/silencing the Demonic Ground of Caliban's Woman," in *Out of the Kumbia: Caribbean Women and Literature*, ed. Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savoury (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990), 360.

¹⁸Ann Thompson, "'Miranda, Where's Your Sister?': Reading Shakespeare's *The Tempest*," in *Feminist Criticism*:
(continued...)

II. Anna Jameson's *Tempest*

Returning now to *Shakspeare's Heroines*, I want to suggest that Jameson's reading of *The Tempest* creates an avenue for challenging interpretations of Miranda as a disempowered subject whose actions are merely reactions to the various male agential forces with whom she shares an island. Although she is arguably the first feminist critic of Shakespeare, Jameson claims to be uninterested in politicizing her work. In the introduction to *Shakspeare's Heroines*, for instance, Jameson addresses the issue of women's rights and its relationship to her own work explicitly, only to dismiss it immediately. Her introduction takes the form of a discussion between Alda, the ostensible author of the book, and Medon, her male interlocutor. "I presume," announces Medon early in their conversation, "that you have written a book to maintain the superiority of your sex over ours." To which Alda, Jameson's alter ego, replies spiritedly: "as to maintaining the superiority, or speculating on the rights of women--nonsense! . . . why should you suspect me of such folly?--it is quite out of date" (3).

Although Alda works to distance herself from overt claims to rights for women, this scene reminds us that Jameson is well aware that her decision to devote an entire

¹⁸(...continued)
Theory and Practice, ed. Susan Sellers (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), 47.

book to a discussion of Shakespeare's female characters is an ideologically charged rather than an apolitical one. Jameson certainly took pains to avoid alienating a conservative reading public on whom she depended financially, but at the same time *Shakspeare's Heroines* clearly reveals a deep concern for the treatment of women by a society that consistently destroyed their intellectual capacities through poor education and unedifying work.

Shakspeare's Heroines may "deal cautiously with feminist politics," but deal with them it clearly does.¹⁹ As her alter ego Alda goes on to explain, for Jameson learning to read Shakespeare's plays is one means of addressing the institutionalized oppression of women by a society that undervalues their potentialities and fails to educate them, a society that Jameson will later characterize as "one vast conventional masquerade of manners" (319). "It appears to me," says Alda,

that the condition of women in society . . . is false in itself and injurious to them, --that the education of women, as at present conducted, is founded in mistaken principles, and tends to increase fearfully the sum of misery and error in both sexes. (4)

Engaging here with a debate about women and education that has its roots in the eighteenth-century polemics of

¹⁹Desmet, "'Intercepting the Dew-Drop,'" 47.

political thinkers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Mary Wollstonecraft, Jameson argues that her society systematically harms women by refusing to educate them correctly. Many of her readings of Shakespeare's female characters reveal this lack of trust in society's strategies for teaching women; this is a central element of Jameson's account of Miranda in particular.

Rather than either ignoring her completely or reading Miranda through traditional Romanticism's figuring of nature as a source of divine creative power,²⁰ Jameson associates her with nature as a means of showing up the destructiveness of misguided social pressures on women. For Jameson, it is Miranda's "total ignorance of the conventional forms and language of society" that makes her capable of both independence and love (151). Arguing that she is "ignorant of those usages of society which teach us to dissemble the real passion" (151-52), Jameson contends that Miranda's sympathetic nature is the result of her lack of contact with a highly coercive notion of propriety generated by a society that is seldom kind to women, especially those who find strength in passion.²¹ On Jameson's account, Miranda's

²⁰For a discussion of this conventional trope, see Anne K. Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 209.

²¹Jameson argues throughout *Shakspeare's Heroines* that intelligent and passionate women are particularly vulnerable to the restrictions and attacks of a narrow-minded society. See especially her discussions of Portia of Belmont and Lady Macbeth (31-54, 318-41).

"naturalness" is constructed not as an alternative to reason or refinement, then, but as a model of compassionate independence.

If Miranda at first appears in Jameson's critical narrative as an emblem for an almost impossibly immaculate vision of celestial perfection--in the passage I first quote above Jameson labels her "all but ethereal"--Miranda gains both shape and substance as the account continues. Noting that Shakespeare has elected to remove her "far from all comparison with her own sex," Jameson points out that Miranda's humanity is deliberately juxtaposed with the magical nature of the island's other inhabitants (149). When she is compared with the "subtile essence" of the "ethereal sprite" Ariel,

. . . Miranda herself appears a palpable reality, a woman, "breathing thoughtful breath," a woman, walking the earth in her mortal loveliness, with a heart as frail-strung, as passion-touched, as ever fluttered in a female bosom. (149)

Bracketing for a moment its exuberant prose, I want to point to this passage's clear attempt to move us away from an account of Miranda as incorporeal heavenly being and toward an understanding of her as a woman. The emphasis here is on Miranda's humanity--her physicality, her sexuality--in

short, what Jameson would call her "womanliness."²² As Jameson's repeated rhetorical emphasis on the word "woman" insists--"Miranda . . . a woman, 'breathing thoughtful breath,' a woman, walking the earth" (my emphasis)--Miranda is a real person with a real heart that beats in a real chest.

Jameson's emphasis here on Miranda's humanity should not be dismissed as naive effusion. She is in no danger of confusing the character of Prospero's daughter with the milliner's assistant in her local hat shop. Rather, her treatment of Miranda as a "real" person signals Jameson's deliberate decision to invoke lived experience as an interpretive context appropriate--even integral--to the study of *The Tempest*. In the introduction to *Shakespeare's Heroines*, Alda argues that Shakespeare's characters "combine history and real life; they are complete individuals, whose hearts and souls are laid open before us." She continues:

We hear Shakespeare's men and women discussed, praised and dispraised, liked, disliked, as real human beings; and in forming our opinions of them we are influenced by our own characters, habits of thought, prejudices, feelings, impulses, just as

²²I have argued elsewhere that although Jameson's notion of womanliness often appears universalizing, *Shakespeare's Heroines* consistently undermines the notion that all women possess a shared essence. See Jessica Slight, "Historical Shakespeare: Anna Jameson and Womanliness," *English Studies in Canada* 19.4 (1993): 387-400.

we are influenced with regard to our acquaintances
and associates. (10)

Such an understanding of the vital role that a reader's ordinary knowledge of people and places and things plays in the practice of literary criticism is at once distinctive and distinctly Romantic.

Like Jameson, Coleridge constructs the experience of reading or watching a play as an interaction between reader or audience member and dramatic character. In a play, he argues, "you meet people who meet and speak to you as in real life, interesting you differently, having some distinctive peculiarity which interests you."²³ For Coleridge, however, this experience of encountering unfamiliar characters/people in new and different situations is associated with the unconscious acquisition of a universalizable self-knowledge: in Shakespeare's plays, he argues elsewhere, "every man sees himself without knowing that he sees himself."²⁴ Jameson, on the other hand, also describes the process of engaging with Shakespearean drama as a meeting between reader and character, but is eager to particularize what she describes as an inherently moral interpretive encounter. That is, lived experience for Jameson consists in specific "habits of thought,"

²³Coleridge, *Shakespearean Criticism*, 2:252.

²⁴Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Coleridge on Shakespeare: The Text of the Lectures of 1811-12*, ed. R. A. Foakes (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1971), 102.

"prejudices," "feelings," and "impulses"--the morally weighted means by which people evaluate each other and the larger world and thereby assert their personhood. Criticism, she suggests, must also partake of this moral realm.

In essence, then, what Jameson proposes is a literary critical model of what Charles Taylor has described as an orientation within the space of moral questions. According to Taylor, being oriented in moral space is constitutive of human agency; that is, knowing oneself as a person requires situating oneself in a space within which questions about what is good and what is bad, what is valuable and what is worthless, can be formulated.²⁵ By locating criticism within this moral realm, Jameson lays the theoretical groundwork for an ethically oriented reading of Shakespeare that refuses to dismiss characters as allegorized ciphers.

Miranda's undeniable humanity and gendered physicality are confirmed for Jameson by a discrete identity that sets her apart from the more generic creatures of fable with whom she shares an island:

Miranda is a consistent, natural human being. Our impression of her nymph-like beauty, her peerless grace and purity of soul, has a distinct and individual character. Not only is she exquisitely

²⁵Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 25-52.

lovely, being what she is, but we are made to feel that she *could not* possibly be otherwise than as she is portrayed.

(149-50; Jameson's emphasis)

Jameson recognizes Miranda's particular qualities not as unimportant variations within the same basic human nature, but as fundamental differences that set her apart from those who surround her. On Jameson's account, Miranda is more than simply her father's daughter; she has an immutably "distinct and individual character" all her own. It is not her ethereality, then, but her identity as an independent moral agent that Jameson celebrates so effusively in *Shakspeare's Heroines*.

If Jameson acclaims Miranda as an independent young woman, however, she also acknowledges Miranda's embeddedness in a complex array of familial relationships, and much of her analysis of *The Tempest* is devoted to a discussion of Miranda's roles as daughter, and later, as wife. In her discussion of literary Romanticism, Anne Mellor identifies what she calls a "feminine Romanticism" that is based "on a subjectivity constructed in relation to other subjectivities, hence a self that is fluid, absorptive, responsive, with permeable ego boundaries."²⁶ Expanding Mellor's notion to include critics as well as writers of fiction and poetry, I want to argue that it is precisely

²⁶Mellor, *Romanticism*, 209 (Mellor's emphasis).

this kind of responsive self that Jameson identifies with Shakespeare's Miranda.

Consider, for example, Jameson's construction of Miranda's childhood on Caliban's "barren isle" as a series of delightfully loving encounters with a personified nature:

[Miranda's] companions have been the rocks and woods, the many-shaped, many-tinted clouds, and the silent stars; her playmates the ocean billows, that stooped their foamy crests and ran rippling to kiss her feet. (150)

Like the novelists and poets Mellor discusses, Jameson tropes nature as a sister or playmate,²⁷ and offers her readers a glimpse of a gentle, fertile world eager to frolic with a human friend.

Rather than grounding her account of *The Tempest* in a celebration of Prospero as autonomous master of the cosmos as her male counterparts so often do, Jameson chooses instead to foreground Miranda's more collaborative model of both human/nature and human/human interaction. And like the authors Mellor discusses in *Romanticism and Gender* who locate identity within a larger social matrix of family or community,²⁸ Jameson focuses attention on Miranda's filial duties and romantic desires as a means of better understanding Miranda as a fully developed self. This

²⁷See Mellor, *Romanticism*, 3, 209-10.

²⁸See Mellor, *Romanticism*, 209.

reading of the self as a relational construct--as a creation shaped by the nexus of relationships that give meaning to its existence--in turn allows us to read Miranda's romance with, and marriage to, Ferdinand not merely as a political affiliation effected for Prospero's pleasure, but as a crucial opportunity for Miranda to derive a sense of herself as an agent in the world.

III. Miranda's Domestic Dissidence

Critics have long assumed that Prospero maintains an iron grip over his strange little family throughout *The Tempest*. Marilyn Williamson, for instance, argues that the "absolute power of the ruler to control the lives of others is unquestioned" in all four of Shakespeare's late Romances, and she sketches a picture of Prospero as a manipulative father and governor who exerts a rough and self-serving authority over his daughter.²⁹ Political and personal ambitions are certainly prime motives for Prospero's actions throughout the play. As rightful duke of Milan, he is anxious to regain his home and to consolidate his power by arranging a marriage between his daughter and the heir to the Neapolitan throne. As a betrayed brother, he is eager to avenge his exile and to confront Antonio with his treachery. At the same time, however, love for his daughter

²⁹Marilyn L. Williamson, *The Patriarchy of Shakespeare's Comedies* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1986), 112, 155-56.

and concern for her future also prompt Prospero to action. As he tells Miranda: "I have done nothing, but in care of thee / (Of thee my dear one, thee my daughter)" (I.ii.16-17).

Williamson is doubtless right to remind us that Prospero's displays of affection for his daughter should not blind us to his manipulation of her, but I am unconvinced by her claim that Miranda remains "an object of exchange between Prospero and Ferdinand."³⁰ Such a reading of the play grants too much control to the play's male characters and too little agency to the quick-witted Miranda. While she is doubtless influenced by her powerful father and by the expectations imposed upon her as the daughter of a duke, Miranda proves strong willed and independent minded in her dealings with both Prospero and Ferdinand. Her moments of domestic defiance are brief, but they constitute a repeated challenge to the dynastic preoccupations of the men who rule her world. Heterosexual romantic desire, Miranda proves, can entail resistance rather than capitulation to patriarchy.

Miranda's marriage to Ferdinand is often read as a manifestation--even a consolidation--of Prospero's irresistible regulatory force. For instance, Peter Greenaway's 1991 cinematic adaptation of the play, *Prospero's Books*, presents a powerful visual image of the

³⁰Williamson, *Patriarchy*, 156.

exiled duke as author of his daughter's fate. Such readings ignore, however, the extent to which Miranda involves herself in the process of selecting a husband.

Prospero certainly engineers and closely supervises the initial encounter between his daughter and the man he hopes she will marry, but Miranda quickly takes the matter of falling in love into her own hands. Thus, the scene in which she and Ferdinand first catch sight of one another presents a moving and comic portrait of romantic attraction and sexual awakening rather than depicting a sterile meeting between two heirs destined to marry purely for reasons of political expedience. Miranda, awed by Ferdinand's arrival on the island, believes at first that she has come upon a spectre of some kind. Curious rather than afraid, and eager to share her find with her father, she discusses the apparition with Prospero:

Mir.

What, is't a spirit?

Lord, how it looks about! Believe me, sir,
It carries a brave form. But 'tis a spirit.

Pros.

No, wench, it eats, and sleeps, and hath such
senses

As we have--such. This gallant which thou
seest

Was in the wrack; and but he's something
stain'd

With grief (that's beauty's canker), thou

mightst call him

A goodly person. He hath lost his fellows,
And strays about to find 'em.

Mir.

I might call him

A thing divine, for nothing natural
I ever saw so noble.

(I.ii.410-20)

Despite her father's assurance that Ferdinand is indeed a man, Miranda seems captivated by the notion that she has discovered a spectre, and even Prospero's gruffness cannot succeed in dampening her enthusiasm for her handsome new discovery. Ferdinand too appears convinced that he has discovered some supernatural creature when he first catches sight of Miranda and he assumes that she must be "the goddess / On whom these airs attend!" (422-23).

While these confusions of the real with the magical, the natural with the celestial, underscore the mysterious essence of the powers which have brought the lovers together, they also insist on a genuine magnetism between Miranda and Ferdinand. Prospero may have engineered their meeting, but, as his reaction to their flirtation testifies, even he is surprised by the impetuousness and intensity of the young lovers' attraction to one another. He observes to Ariel:

At the first sight

They have chang'd eyes. . . .

.
 They are both in either's pow'rs; but this swift
 business

I must uneasy make, lest too light winning
 Make the prize light.

(I.ii.441-53)

Prospero's account of the mutual infatuation between Miranda and Ferdinand constructs love as a potent force and implies that the magician is well aware that the lovers are in thrall not to him but to each other. Nevertheless, fearing that an overly brief courtship will lead his daughter and her suitor to take the serious business of marriage lightly, Prospero exerts his parental authority in an attempt to slow their wooing.

Miranda immediately subverts her father's attempts to meddle in her love life, however. Rather than obeying his instruction that she refrain from speaking with Ferdinand, Miranda instead seeks out the handsome shipwreck victim and announces her attraction to him. Her defiant passion for the prince of Naples is ardent and unrestrained, and again bears none of the hesitancy of a woman about to embark on a marriage of convenience. She tells him:

How features are abroad
 I am skilless of; but by my modesty
 (The jewel in my dower), I would not wish
 Any companion in the world but you;

Nor can imagination form a shape,
 Besides yourself, to like of. But I prattle
 Something too wildly, and my father's precepts
 I therein do forget.

(III.i.52-59)

Though mindful of Prospero's "precepts," Miranda is willing to risk her father's wrath in order to spend more time investigating a man whose "shape" she clearly finds irresistible. While such scenes between Miranda and Ferdinand present a funny and touching image of her love for the Neapolitan heir, they also serve to emphasize Miranda's willingness to defy her father in search of her own destiny.

The politically subversive potential of Miranda's deliberate disobedience of her father should not be exaggerated. Like any teenager who breaks her curfew and defies her parents in order to date the boy of her choosing, Miranda resents her father's attempt to intrude in her social life and resists his efforts to constrain her. Her defiance is localized and she clearly risks little more than her father's displeasure by her rebellious behaviour; although powerful and easily angered, Prospero is never presented as a physical threat to his daughter. Nevertheless, Miranda's decision to marry Ferdinand should not be dismissed as the inevitable consequence of Prospero's political ambitions. Miranda's choices are admittedly few, but she is presented as an imaginative and headstrong young

woman who shows no signs of acquiescing unthinkingly to her father's wishes. Discussing marriage practices in sixteenth-century France, Natalie Zemon Davis argues that "a thread of female autonomy may have been built precisely around [a] sense of being given away, that women sometimes turned the cultural formulation around and gave themselves away."³¹ Miranda's clandestine flirtation with Ferdinand and her decision to marry him present, I would argue, a possible fictional analogue to this real world strategy for achieving self-expression and even, perhaps, a sense of agency through marriage.

While Prospero is outwardly acknowledged as the legislator of his island paradise, then, Miranda proves a subtle and consistent challenger of his autocratic ways. Indeed even before Ferdinand's arrival on the island, Miranda is unwilling to let her father manipulate her world without intruding. Guessing that her father has been responsible for creating the storm that has destroyed a ship before her eyes, Miranda demands that Prospero calm the seas: "If by your art, my dearest father, you have / Put the wild waters in this roar, allay them" (I.ii.1-2). Miranda's command underscores the extent of Prospero's remarkable

³¹Natalie Zemon Davis, "Boundaries and the Sense of Self in Sixteenth-Century France," in *Reconstructing Individualism: Autonomy, Individuality, and the Self in Western Thought*, ed. Thomas C. Heller, Morton Sosna, and David E. Wellbery (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), 61.

abilities, but as her speech continues Miranda grants herself an equal or even superior power to control the cosmos:

Had I been any God of power, I would
Have sunk the sea within the earth or ere
It should the good ship so have swallow'd, and
The fraughting souls within her.

(I.ii.10-13)

Envisioning herself as a "God of power," Miranda claims the strength to command her surroundings. Going her father one better, she imagines depriving the sea of its human catch by sinking it into earth.³²

If Miranda proves herself to be aware of the operation of magical power on the island and ambitious for a compassionate power of her own, she also demonstrates that she is conscious of the more mundane workings of political power. Although Prospero's repeated admonitions that she listen to his story--"ope thine ear. / Obey, and be attentive" (I.ii.37-38); "Dost thou attend me?" (78); "Thou attend'st not!" (87); "Dost thou hear?" (106)--imply that Miranda may be a less than attentive listener, her responses to his tale indicate quite the opposite. Throughout Prospero's description of their past, Miranda appears not only alert but also attuned to the political nuances of his

³²It is interesting to note that later in this scene Prospero refers to himself as a "prince of power" (I.ii.55; my emphasis).

story as she punctuates her father's narrative with perceptive questions. "What foul play had we, that we came from thence?" she asks upon hearing of her illustrious Milanese ancestry (I.ii.60). And later, when Prospero has described Antonio's treachery with the Neapolitan king and recounted their removal from the city, Miranda asks: "Wherefore did they not / That hour destroy us?" (138-39). Such questions reveal that Miranda is listening intently and that she quickly grasps the import of the situation in which Prospero finds himself. Her questions are also a subtle form of challenge to Prospero's authority. As J. Robinson notes in his *Observations Divine and Moral*, "it is a kind of impeachment of Authoritie to examine the Reasons of Things."³³ Miranda's mild querying of her father suggests that persistent questions can also be usefully understood as "impeachments" of authority.

Miranda's assertiveness also extends to her dealings with Ferdinand. Although she is smitten by him, Miranda retains a strong sense of her own worth and an earnest faith in her own abilities. Indeed it is she who must teach Ferdinand a thing or two about effective wooing. Having defied her father and sought Ferdinand out, Miranda is met not with words of tenderness or passion but with grumbling and complaining about the laborious task Prospero has

³³J. Robinson, quoted in Kevin Sharpe, *Politics and Ideas in Early Stuart England* (London: Pinter Publishers, 1989), 11.

assigned him: "O most dear mistress, / The sun will set
before I shall discharge / What I must strive to do"

(III.i.21-23). It is only when Miranda offers to carry the
logs herself--"If you'll sit down, / I'll bear your logs the
while. Pray give me that, / I'll carry it to the pile" (23-
25)--that her prince awakens to his role as courtly lover.

Miranda also makes it clear that she will not allow
herself to be manipulated by her new husband any more than
she will by her father. In the final scene of the play, for
instance, Miranda calls Ferdinand on an attempt to cheat her
at chess:

Mir. Sweet lord, you play me false.

Fer. No, my dearest love,
I would not for the world.

Mir. Yes, for a score of kingdoms you should
wrangle,
And I would call it fair play.

(V.i.172-75)

A political realist, Miranda is aware that "wrangling" over
kingdoms sometimes entails "false plays." Her accusation,
however, reminds Ferdinand of the value of loyalty and her
public challenge to his authority demonstrates that she will
not let herself be exploited by her husband's autocratic
ways any more than by her father's.

IV. Dominance, Deference, and Defiance

I have argued thus far that *The Tempest* encourages us to recognize Miranda's interactions with both her father and her husband as the defiant actions of a self-fashioning woman rather than the programmatic reactions of a dehumanized cipher. Such a reading, I have suggested, puts the obsessively dynastic preoccupations of Prospero and Ferdinand into stark relief. I want now to turn to a consideration of Caliban's obsession with lineage and to the direct threat that his fixation with dynasty poses to Miranda.

It is Prospero who first refers to Caliban's attempted rape of Miranda. He tells Caliban:

I have us'd thee
 . . . with human care, and lodg'd thee
 In mine own cell, till thou didst seek to violate
 The honor of my child.

(I.ii.345-48)

"O ho, O ho," retorts Caliban, "would't had been done! / Thou didst prevent me; I had peopled else / This isle with Calibans" (349-51). "Abhorred slave," replies Miranda in her turn,

Which any print of goodness wilt not take,
 Being capable of all ill! I pitied thee,
 Took pains to make thee speak, taught thee each
 hour

One thing or other. When thou didst not, savage,
 Know thine own meaning, but wouldst gabble like
 A thing most brutish, I endow'd thy purposes
 With words that made them known. But thy vild
 race

(Though thou didst learn) had that in't which good
 natures

Could not abide to be with; therefore wast thou
 Deservedly confin'd into this rock,
 Who hadst deserv'd more than a prison.

(I.ii.351-62)

Recent critics have tended to focus on Miranda's admittedly inflammatory colonialist rhetoric here rather than on the horror of both Caliban's attack and the implications of his highly politicized desire to impregnate her. Dismissing Miranda's fury at Caliban's posturing boasts as part of a colonialist powerplay, these critics either dismiss the attempted rape entirely or imply that Miranda is responsible for it.

Although Caliban clearly admits to his attack on Miranda, there is considerable reluctance among many critics to acknowledge it. In their cultural history of Caliban, for instance, Alden Vaughan and Virginia Vaughan raise the possibility that the attack on Miranda is a fabrication:

it is a matter of textual interpretation to accept
 or reject the characters' "accuracy" in reporting

"events," as in Prospero's charge that Caliban tried to rape Miranda. . . .³⁴

Such resistance to acknowledging the assault is difficult to explain since the play offers no evidence to suggest that Prospero's accusation is false. Indeed, Caliban's version of Prospero and Miranda's early days on the island--including the attack on Miranda--closely matches their own. Prospero explains that upon their arrival on the island he and Miranda treated Caliban as an orphan in need of nurturing and education, and he describes how he "lodg'd" the younger Caliban in his household. Miranda confirms this account when she describes her efforts to teach Caliban to express himself through language. Caliban's account of these same early days matches those of both Prospero and Miranda:

When thou cam'st first,
Thou strok'st me and made much of me, wouldst give
me
Water with berries in't, and teach me how
To name the bigger light, and how the less,
That burn by day and night; and then I lov'd thee
And show'd thee all the qualities o' th' isle,

³⁴Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan, *Shakespeare's Caliban: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 4. Although in a later synopsis of the play Vaughan and Vaughan seem to assume that the attempted rape has taken place, no explanation of their earlier hesitation is offered (17).

The fresh springs, brine-pits, barren place and
fertile.

(I.ii.332-38)

Since Caliban--proving himself perfectly capable of the speech Miranda claims to have taught him--never demurs, there is no reason to doubt Prospero's account of their collective history.

While other critics seem aware of Miranda's vulnerability in the face of Caliban's hostilities and are prepared to accept the account of the attempted rape, they resist holding Caliban responsible for his acts. She does not deny Caliban's attack on Miranda, but Lorie Jerrell Leininger comes dangerously close to excusing it when she argues that "anyone who is forced into servitude, confined to a rock, kept under constant surveillance, and punished by supernatural means would wish his enslavers ill."³⁵

Putting aside for a moment the problematic notion that rape might somehow be a justified response to confinement, I want to focus on Leininger's reversal of Shakespeare's narrative. Like Vaughan and Vaughan, Leininger seems determined to undermine the veracity of Prospero's accusations against Caliban despite the weight of textual evidence to the contrary. Arguing that Prospero has deliberately lured

³⁵Lorie Jerrell Leininger, "The Miranda Trap: Sexism and Racism in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*," in *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, ed. Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz et al. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 288.

Caliban using Miranda as bait, Leininger suggests that Prospero tempts Caliban to evil and then uses his attack on Miranda to justify his enslavement. As both Prospero and Miranda make clear, however, Caliban's attack is the catalyst for his punishment, not its result. Prospero reminds Caliban that he was treated kindly "till thou didst seek to violate / The honor of my child" (I.ii.347-48; my emphasis). This account is immediately corroborated not only by Miranda's testimony (I.ii.308-309, 351-47), but also by Caliban's jauntily unrepentant reply:

O ho, O ho, would't had been done!
 Thou didst prevent me; I had peopled else
 This isle with Calibans.

(I.ii.349-51)

It is clear then that Caliban accepts the charge against him: he intended to rape Miranda and his anger with Prospero stems not from outrage over an unfounded accusation but from the frustration of having been interrupted.

If Leininger blames Miranda and her father for Caliban's attack, Paul Brown transforms the attempted rape into an issue of colonialist interpellation and interpretation. Suggesting that Prospero's principal aim in recounting his history is to authenticate his role as master, Brown reads the narrative of Prospero's arrival on the island as his attempt to interpellate Ariel, Miranda, and Caliban as both subjects of his discourse and legatees

of his civil philanthropy. Predictably then, for Brown it is not the effects of rape itself, but rather the effects of the charge of rape that are of interest:

The issue here is not whether Caliban is actually a rapist or not, since Caliban accepts the charge. I am rather concerned with the political effects of this charge at this moment in the play.³⁶

Although her victimization is the ostensible subject of critical scrutiny here, Miranda is abruptly sidelined.

Brown's account continues:

The first effect [of the attempted rape charge] is to circumvent Caliban's version of events by reencoding his boundlessness as rapacity: his inability to discern a concept of private, bounded property concerning his own dominions is reinterpreted as a desire to violate the chaste virgin, who epitomises courtly property.³⁷

On Brown's account, then, Prospero's concern for his daughter becomes an attempt to "reencode" Caliban, rape becomes a process of "reinterpretation," and Miranda herself becomes "courtly property." This transformation of Miranda from human victim into royal possession is complete just

³⁶Paul Brown, "'This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine': *The Tempest* and the Discourse of Colonialism," in *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism*, ed. Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (1985; reprint, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 62.

³⁷Brown, "'This thing of darkness,'" 62.

five pages later when Brown refers to her as a pawn.³⁸

Further reducing her from object of male desire to courtly toy, Brown's account finally empties Miranda of any residue of humanity.

This dehumanization of Miranda is perhaps most disturbingly evident in Jyotsna Singh's reading of Miranda's narrow escape as a denial of Caliban's rights as political rapist. "Neither Prospero nor Miranda," Singh argues, "allow Caliban an identity as a desiring subject who wishes to gain sexual access to Miranda for the legitimate aim of 'peopl[ing] . . . This isle with Calibans.'" ³⁹ Clearly Singh does not mean to propose rape as an acceptable means of asserting national identity in the face of oppression. Nevertheless, the disturbing implications of her attempt to rescue Caliban from racist sentimentalizations of *The Tempest* points to the urgent need for feminist criticism to reassess its relationship to post-colonial theory.

Although Singh herself claims to have undertaken just such a reassessment, her conclusions do not bode well for Shakespeare's female characters. Her article has as its explicit aim a challenge to "postcolonial reappraisals" of *The Tempest* that posit "a utopia in which women are

³⁸Brown, "'This thing of darkness,'" 67.

³⁹Jyotsna G. Singh, "Caliban versus Miranda: Race and Gender Conflicts in Postcolonial Readings of *The Tempest*," in *Feminist Readings of Early Modern Culture: Emerging Subjects*, ed. Valerie Traub et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 198.

marginalized or missing."⁴⁰ Anti-colonial appropriations of *The Tempest*, Singh argues convincingly, cannot expose completely the evils of colonialism because they fail to address its fundamental sexism. According to Singh, Caliban appears in these revisions of the play as a "convenient, homogenizing symbol for decolonization" while Miranda is acknowledged only as the desirable property of his colonizing masters.⁴¹ Although Singh seems to want to address Miranda's exclusion from relations of power on the island, her own reading of *The Tempest* only succeeds in reinforcing the objectification and allegorization of Miranda she seeks to critique.

Following Paul Brown, Singh reads Prospero as an omnipotent ruler interested in controlling his subjects' sexuality as a means of perpetuating his colonialist project. Finding an analogy for this sexual economy in the models of gift exchange developed by social anthropologists like Claude Lévi-Strauss and Marcel Mauss among others, Singh presents Caliban's attempt to rape Miranda as an effort to challenge Prospero's right to control the gift of sexual access to his daughter. Like so many of her predecessors in both the distant and the more recent past of *Tempest* criticism, then, Singh understands Miranda merely as a counter in a power game dominated by the male characters

⁴⁰Singh, "Caliban versus Miranda," 194.

⁴¹Singh, "Caliban versus Miranda," 194-195.

in the play. It is this objectification of Miranda that in turn allows her to legitimate Caliban's attempted rape as the self-actualizing act of a "desiring subject."

As Caliban's gleeful politicization of his violent assault on Miranda emphasizes--and as horrifying recent events in Bosnia and Algeria have demonstrated--rape can be deployed as a powerful tool of war. By generating terror, by violating social and ethical standards, and by hijacking the reproductive cycle of entire communities, political rapists' attacks on individual women become a means to ethnic cleansing. Singh recognizes sexism in the failure of both Shakespeare and the mostly male revisionists who have recast, revised, and rewritten his play to provide an aboriginal mate for Caliban,⁴² but she never questions Caliban's right to force a woman--any woman--to "people his isle" for him.

Political readings of *The Tempest* of the kind made by Leininger, Brown, and Singh substitute an acknowledgement of Caliban as "desiring subject" for a humane reading of Miranda. Assuming that Miranda is merely an unwitting pawn in a game of political intrigue being acted out by the men in the play, and accepting that her chastity can have value only as a symbol of her father's power and political aspirations, these accounts of *The Tempest* blind themselves to the possibility that Miranda refuses to allow her

⁴²See Singh, "Caliban versus Miranda," 207.

victimization to silence her and actively chooses to be chosen as wife by Ferdinand in order that she may play an active role in her own self-definition.

Eager to present Caliban as an innocent victim of colonial usurpation, these critics tend to understand his attack on Miranda as either the inevitable act of an unregenerate savage at the mercy of his "intrinsically evil nature,"⁴³ or as the emancipatory apex of a colonized subject's bumbling attempts at self-fashioning. Rather than problematizing nineteenth-century readings of the play that present Caliban as a monster who is either incapable of understanding the immorality of his attack on Miranda or unable to restrain his violent impulses, then, these recent critics of *The Tempest* either follow their forefathers in the paternalist claim that Caliban is unable to control his own behaviour--Marilyn Williamson, for instance, refers obliquely to Caliban's "rampant" sexuality⁴⁴--or they imply that his attempt to rape Miranda should be understood as a some kind of revolutionary accomplishment rather than as a morally repugnant act. Ironically then, even as they attempt to reclaim Caliban as oppressed revolutionary, contemporary critics repeat the primitivization of Caliban initiated by their predecessors and thereby deny him the moral agency upon which the political rights they are

⁴³Leininger, "The Miranda Trap," 288.

⁴⁴Williamson, *Patriarchy*, 163.

rightly so eager to grant him must necessarily be predicated.

Understanding Caliban as a moral agent--which entails acknowledging that he is wrong to try to rape Miranda--does not logically (and certainly not ethically) require either that we justify his enslavement or that we deny Miranda the right to freedom from violence.¹ The assumption that both Miranda and Caliban cannot act simultaneously as moral agents in the life-world of *The Tempest* is the product, I suspect, of the epidemic of binary thinking that swept through academe as post-colonial criticism was gaining its hold in both North America and Britain. The political issues raised by the interpretive minefield of Caliban's attempted rape of Miranda are only problematic, however, if Caliban's and Miranda's claims to freedom (and to our sympathy) are understood as mutually exclusive. This case offers a particularly valuable illustration of the limitations of a critical dualism that has been unable to reconcile feminist theory's insistence that women be read as active agents of discourse and post-colonial theory's insistence that ethnic and racial others be recognized as legitimate subjects within that same discourse.

Ann Thompson has argued that "much early feminist criticism consisted merely in privileging female characters and identifying with their viewpoints, especially if they could be claimed to be in any way subversive or

protofeminist." Calling identification with Miranda "clearly impossible," Thompson sets out instead to "explore the 'ideology of femininity' at work" in both *The Tempest* and recent criticism of the play. The sexist and colonialist "patterns of exploitation" that she discovers clearly unsettle her and her article ends with the plaintive query: "Must a feminist reading necessarily be a negative one?"⁴⁵

I hope that my reading of the play has provided a resounding "no" to Thompson's question. Following Anna Jameson's lead, I have read *The Tempest* from an ethical standpoint which insists that a feminism that cannot defend Miranda from attempted rape is no meaningful kind of feminism at all. I have also combined Jameson's model of ethical criticism with post-colonial theory's insistence that the institutions and practices of Western literary criticism recognize and remedy their tendency to read past an ignoble imperialist history in an effort to grant Caliban the moral agency too often denied him. An agent at the mercy of either uncontrollable social forces or irrepressible psychological yearnings is surely not a moral agent in any meaningful sense of that term.

I want to make it clear here that I am not arguing that Miranda is a completely unencumbered self, free to behave exactly as she pleases. Her world is dominated by powerful

⁴⁵Thompson, "'Miranda, Where's Your Sister?'" 47, 54.

men whose overwhelming preoccupations with questions of lineage necessarily limit her choices. Rather, I am proposing a reading of the play that accepts Miranda as a moral agent in her own right. This reading, and the understanding of selfhood upon which it is predicated, acknowledges that there are limitations on Miranda's behaviour--as there are on any member of any household--and at the same time allows us to recognize the importance of the choices that Miranda is able to make.

Recent political criticism has permanently laid to rest the sentimentalized vision of *The Tempest* that dominated nineteenth-century Shakespeare criticism, and has rightly located in Prospero's magical dominion the operations of a repressive colonial regime. It is Anna Jameson's emphasis on Miranda as a bravely independent but always embedded self that reminds us that *The Tempest* does offer some alternative to the paternalist order with which the play opens. The play's emphasis on Miranda's fierce protection of her chastity and her desire to marry Ferdinand combine to present her as a desiring self who gains a sense of moral agency not by seeking complete autonomy, but instead by recognizing the importance of her domestic ties.

I am not arguing for a return to the "dramatic appreciation" that A. C. Bradley proposed to substitute for examinations of "Shakespeare's place in the history either

of English literature or of the drama in general."⁴⁶ I am, however, proposing that an ethical criticism of the kind practised by Jameson, tempered by the insights of recent theory, offers the best hope for a literary criticism that can acknowledge women as active agents.

⁴⁶A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: Macmillan and Company, 1958), xiii.

Conclusion

Bringing It All Back Home

When he is told that he is about to be entertained with a play, Christopher Sly, Shakespeare's tinker-turned-gentleman, wants to know if the action will include gambolling and tumbling tricks. "No, my good lord," replies the page disguised as his lady wife, "it is more pleasing stuff." "What, household stuff?" asks Sly. "It is a kind of history," agrees his young companion (*The Taming of the Shrew*, Ind.ii.137-41). As Sly's page/lady points out, domestic comedy offers up histories of a very particular kind, and as Sly's immediate association of "pleasing stuff" with the "household" reminds us, even a hard-drinking rogue can appreciate the pleasures of domestic life. As he settles in to watch the play that follows and eventually slips into sleep, Sly is preoccupied with the grandeur of his surroundings and with thoughts of making love to his new "wife." He is excited, in short, by household matters.

By tracing Sly's journey from heath to hearth and his simultaneous transformation from homeless tinker to lordly householder, the Induction of *The Taming of the Shrew* insists on an association between Sly's sense of himself as

an agent in the world and his relation to the household. While this relation between self and domestic space is further explored in the Italianate comedy of wooing and wedding that follows, it is never rendered completely transparent. Sly is, after all, the victim of an elaborate hoax, and the performance he witnesses may be no more than the reverie of a man overwhelmed by luxury and drink. Such ambiguity often marks Shakespearean comedy's investigation of the household and of the human relationships that give it its moral form.

As French philosopher Gaston Bachelard notes, slippage between fact and fancy is part of what marks the household as a deeply moral space:

If I were asked to name the chief benefit of the house, I should say: the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace. Thought and experience are not the only things that sanction human values. The values that belong to daydreaming mark humanity in its depths.⁴⁷

Describing the house as a refuge for dreamers, Bachelard insists that domestic spaces are always more than sites of biological or cultural maintenance and reproduction. For Bachelard the humanizing imperative of the household

⁴⁷Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Presses Universitaires de France, 1958; reprint, Boston: Beacon, 1994), 6.

encourages reverie while its physical and moral architecture shields, even nurtures, desire.

For Shakespeare, too, the household operates as a haven for the humanizing activity of daydreaming. In *The Taming of the Shrew*, as in each of the plays that I have discussed in the course of this dissertation, characters formulate their distinctive visions of the good life within the boundaries of the household. And in each play characters either discover for themselves or are taught by others that the process of formulating a notion of the good is at once deeply personal and inescapably public; as such it is an activity that need not be reserved for the public spheres of marketplace or forum. Rather, dreams of the good can and do take shape in the course of quotidian activities carried out within such domestic spaces as livingrooms, gardens, and kitchens. While modern society has tended to assume--following Aristotle--that the good life can only be pursued away from the menial tasks of the household, these plays insist that visions of the good are necessarily shaped by the domestic spaces in which they are developed. The business of living together in any household inevitably requires a series of quotidian negotiations and compromises; bargaining over domestic matters is not merely a distraction from the good life, but an essential part of developing an understanding of what the good life might entail.

While my analysis of Shakespearean comedy has relied on a recognition of the historically specific social relations that predominated in early modern England, I have also suggested that early modern drama can continue to make an important contribution to our thinking about the distribution of domestic authority. This aspect of my project has presented a particular challenge for me as feminist critic. For many feminists a play like *The Taming of the Shrew* is an irreclaimable relic of a deeply misogynist past.⁴⁸ "To enjoy the comedy of the play," argues one recent critic, "readers and viewers must work to see domestic violence from the point of view of an abuser-- that is, they must minimalize the violence and, at the same time, justify its use."⁴⁹ For others, *The Comedy of Errors* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* are politically suspect, and *The Tempest* irredeemably racist. I agree with these critics that the horrors of a sexist, elitist, racist past (or indeed, of such a present) should never be either sentimentalized or forgotten. Nevertheless, I am unwilling either to consign these plays to the dustbin of history or

⁴⁸See, for instance, Emily Detmer, "Civilizing Subordination: Domestic Violence and *The Taming of the Shrew*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 48 (1997): 273-94 and Lynda E. Boose, "Scolding Brides and Bridling Scolds: Taming The Woman's Unruly Member," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42 (1991): 179-213. Barbara Hodgdon takes a more nuanced position, but she too finally reads *Shrew* as a conservative defence of patriarchy (see "Katherina Bound; or, Play(K)ating the Strictures of Everyday Life," *PMLA* 107 [1992]: 538-53).

⁴⁹Emily Detmer, "Civilizing Subordination," 274.

to read them as quaint artifacts of a time long past, since reading Shakespeare's comedies merely as outmoded accounts of social history would entail dismissing their astute examination of the complex process of negotiating household life.

Rather than either attempting the improbable task of reading the plays in a moral vacuum, or reading them against a post-Enlightenment notion of individual liberty and autonomy of action that means little in an early modern context, I have instead read representations of the household in the plays as explorations of ethical inquiry as it pertains to everyday lived experience. "Ethical life," Seyla Benhabib reminds us, "encompasses much more than the relationship of right-bearing generalized others to each other."⁵⁰ While the realm of the ordinary is always embedded in a larger social formation, the household creates its own values and obligations precisely because it is the domain of particular, everyday meaning. As we approach the turn of another millennium with ever-increasing pressure to reinscribe "family values" that ghettoize women within the home while at the same time denying the value of the contributions they make there, there is an urgent need to reform critical backformations that have impoverished our literary heritage. By recognizing the particular values and

⁵⁰Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 11.

obligations created by the household Shakespeare criticism can, I think, begin to explore more fully the historical significance of dramatic literature and to recognize the role played by the domestic realm in the creation of a just and compassionate society.

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