“As proper a woman as any in Cheap”:
Women in Shops on the Early Modern Stage

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Theater audiences of early modern London consisted of those who worked in shops and those who patronized them. As part of everyday life and shared experience the shop world seems a fitting context for the plots of plays these Londoners went to see. Perhaps, though, the commonplace was thought insufficiently exciting and exotic to be of interest; for whatever reasons, shop scenes are in fact relatively uncommon in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century drama. In the period from 1580 to 1642, only about thirty-two extant plays have stage directions that mention a shop or include dialogue, action, and props that define the location as a place where goods are sold. In some, shop scenes are substantial and central, but in others the shop element is merely incidental. Ten plays with significant shop scenes appeared between 1602 and 1613,1 which doubtless reflects the growing importance of the shopkeeping class in the world of early Jacobean London. What all these scenes most obviously have in common is variety—of plot function, merchandise, setting, and action. But closer consideration reveals that about twenty of them share not only a shopkeeper but also a shopkeeper’s wife (or sometimes a daughter)—a female character whose role increases significantly over the forty-five-year period from 1594 to 1639, during which it is possible to see the evolution of a minor dramatic and theatrical convention with a topical subtext. In particular, the wife who shares the running of a shop with her husband is depicted as not only an object of desire—put on display like a commodity for sale—but also a figure whose role in running the shop gives her a significant degree of freedom and authority. The paradoxes inherent in this duality are reflected in the erratic but nonetheless telling and increasingly ironic treatment of the shop women in these domestic-mercantile plays.

Women were of course important participants in the running of shops long before the sixteenth century. Writing of medieval London, Derek Keene observes that

Retail trading in shops and selds offered a means of earning a livelihood to a very wide range of individuals. In particular, it provided an opportunity for women, who
might organise the distributive side of the family economy while their husbands manufactured items in the workshop or travelled in search of goods. Women might also look after a shop or a stall at the same time as supervising a household or children.²

It is difficult to know how such women were perceived in the early modern period because those few contemporary historians who comment on shops have little or nothing to say about the shopkeepers. John Stow, for example, mentions the kinds of shops on a given street and their history, and sometimes provides lists of the tempting goods they sold, but his focus is primarily on wealthy merchants who spent money on buildings and other good works. Such silence can be contrasted to the frequent allusions to shopkeepers’ wives as either comic or dangerous figures of temptation and disruption in satirical writings and the dialogue of plays. But these offer an ambiguous if not completely contradictory range of views. Among the most overt in implying that women in shops were literally for sale is a Ben Jonson epigram: “Hornet, thou hast thy wife dressed, for the stall / To draw thee custom: but herself gets all.”³ Similarly, in The Family of Love, Purge, an apothecary, seems to comment on how things are:

The grey-eyed morning braves me to my face, and calls me sluggard: ’tis time for tradesmen to be in their shops; for he that tends well his shop, and hath an alluring wife with a graceful what d’ye lack? shall be sure to have good doings, and good doings is that that crowns so many citizens with the horns of abundance.⁴

Pasquils Palinodia similarly refers to “every Cuckold, that cries What de’ e lack.”⁵ The speaker in this satiric poem offers advice for shopkeeping success:

And therefore let a Tradesman that would thriue,  
First get a shop in some faire streete of taking,  
My next aduice is, that he fairely wiue,  
For such a toye is many a yong-mans making.  

([B4v])

Other writers, while using the idea that a woman in a shop is a come-on, seem less ready to imply that their husbands are necessarily cuckolds. In The Dutch Courtesan, a shopwife’s commercial importance is conveyed when Mistress Burnish, a goldsmith’s wife, is said to be “as proper a woman as any in Cheap” because “she paints now, and yet she keeps her husband’s old customers to him still. In troth, a fine-faced wife in a wainscot carved seat is a worthy ornament to a tradesman’s shop, and an attractive, I warrant; her husband shall find it in the custom of his ware.”⁶ In Tell-Trothes New-yeares Gift, the author actually seems to blame the shopkeeper for the wife’s seduc-
tive behavior; he offers an “Inuectiue against Jelosy,” describing different kinds of jealous husbands:

But these of the first kinde, are knaues in graine, that hauing lauisht their stockes leaudly by badd meanes, and seeing their estates to grow weake, will seeke out wiues not of the common sorte for properness, but suche matchlesse paragons, as are for neatnesse not to be mated in a countrey. These must bee sett in their shoppes to tole in customers, unto whome if they show not themselues good-fellowes by gentle speeches, their houses will proue to hoat for them. They must not sticke to promise fairley and to kisse, so they do it closely, onely this proviso must be had, that they keep them out of their money boxes and closecubberds. Which practice proouinge profitable, and thereby their estates being amended, straight false measure is suspected, and thereby on this their owne inuention misliked off.7

Some twenty years later, Thomas Gainsford expresses his criticism in a way that indicates the potential power available to a shopkeeper’s wife:

A citizen is more troubled with his wife then his wares; for they are sorted, locked vp and neuer brought out, but by constraint for the profit of their master; but his wife is decked, adorned, neatly apparelled, sits for the gaze, goes at her pleasure, and will not be restrained from any sights or delights, or merry-meetings; where they may shew their beauties, or riches, or recreate themselues.8

Recent studies have cited criticisms such as Gainsford’s to argue that the primary focus of contemporary attacks on women was their insatiable desire for goods. Citing Stow, Karen Newman describes how

The proliferation of goods described in the Survey and their availability for sale in the London exchanges and growing West End represent an early episode in the process of commodification under capitalism. Goods from the continent and from more exotic lands were for the first time available in numbers in England. . . . In the early seventeenth century, woman became the target for contemporary ambivalence toward that process. She is represented in the discourses of Jacobean London as at once consumer and consumed—her supposed desire for goods is linked to her sexual availability.9

And Ian Archer notes that “Consumption was a moral problem because the desire for goods was linked with sexual desire. The Christian tradition had conflated luxuria and lust: luxury was equated with desire, and desire with disobedience.” He quotes moralists who “drove home the parallels between prostitution and trade” and observes how “The drama suggests that shopping expeditions by court gallants were as much occasions for sexual aggression against citizens’ wives as for the purchasing of goods.” He concludes:
Thus shopping became a locus for anxieties about the gender order: the apparent availability of women in the shops and the desire of city women for consumer goods threatened the patriarchal order on which the authority of citizen husbands rested.10

Certainly there is evidence to support this view, but while dramatists do sometimes present women as ravenous consumers, the plays with actual shop scenes are in fact more interested in the behavior of shopkeepers’ wives and daughters when they are perceived as objects of desire—tokens in a commercial exchange with a customer or husband-to-be. Earlier in his essay Archer makes the important point that “Women probably enjoyed more independence in the capital because of the nature of their work, participating at the front of the shop, running an alehouse, buying provisions in the market” (p. 184). This idea—that women in shops enjoyed freedoms and acquired responsibilities analogous if not equal to those of men, and that these women were therefore perceived as a threat to social boundaries, which in turn exacerbated sexual and class tensions—is, I would argue, a view that goes a long way in explaining how female figures in stage shops are treated by both the other characters and the playwrights.

As the seventeenth century began, the growth of trade and the concomitant expansion of commercial London helped create a real-world context for plays set in the streets frequented daily by their audiences. Furthermore, the way this mercantile world was often created onstage, by discovering a woman in a recognizable “shop”—with table or shop board, merchandise, and apprentices—was itself an overtly theatrical event: the manner of presentation invited spectators to look at the figure onstage much as they might a real woman in a real shop. When the shop women in these plays complain of their vulnerability to the male “gaze” there is almost certainly more than one level of significance operating. Indeed, Stephen Gosson’s criticisms of women in theater audiences suggests an attitude that might easily have included women in shops: “For this is general, that they which show themselues openly, desire to bee seene. . . . Thought is free: you can forbidde no man, that vieweth you, to noate you, and that noateth you, to iudge you.”11 He later warns, “You neede not goe abroade to bee tempted, you shall be intised at your owne windowes[.] The best counsel that I can giue you, is to keepe home, & shun all occasion of ill speech” (F4r). Women who sat in shops calling out “what d’ ye lack?” would seem to have been acting contrary to this advice, thus posing a threat to male authority of the sort represented by Gosson.

The relationship between what is depicted in plays with shop scenes and what actually happened in the real world of the audience is of course virtually impossible to ascertain after four hundred years. Certainly it is dangerous to assume that the events and characters were, or were intended as, an accurate rendition of reality. But given the exaggeration typical of mildly satiric com-
edy, it is nevertheless possible that we are getting a response to (if not a reflection of) everyday experiences and attitudes. If the evident power and authority of women in the real shops were seen as threatening the established hierarchies of society and commerce, it would not be surprising if dramatists found ways to appeal to audiences by reflecting their ambivalence or resistance to such women. In fact, however, rather than encouraging or confirming spectators’ reactionary prejudices, the women in shop scenes are never simply victims of successful patriarchal dominance. While the idea that a woman in a shop is “for sale” is certainly present, it is repeatedly used as a context for characters and events that call the fantasy stereotype into question. Furthermore, in the short-lived vogue for shop scenes in the plays of the early seventeenth century it is possible to see the convention developing in such a way that the women in them acquire more freedom over time rather than less.

The increase in the number of shops, and therefore of women in them, probably helps to explain why these women began to be seen in an increasing number of plays. In Robert Wilson’s *The Cobbler’s Prophecy* (c. 1590, pr. 1594), Ralph Cobbler enters “with his stoole, his implements and shoes, and sitting on his stoole, falls to sing.” His wife Zelota calls to him from within, “year best leave singing and fall to work by & by while I to buy meat for our dinner to market doe.” Ralph replies, “And you were best leave your scolding to, & get you away,” threatening to “knock [her] on the head” if she comes out. When she does so, however, “He creepes under the stoole” (ll. 67–69, 71, 75), a stereotypical browbeaten husband. But then the play’s supernatural element takes over, with Zelota being charmed by Mercury as punishment. She reappears again later, still “mad,” and when she stabs and kills “a traitor” (l. 1358), she and Ralph are arrested. The play ends happily with Ralph deciding to give up his prophetic powers and become a cobbler again, to which Zelota agrees. There is no indication that she plays a role in the shop. This can be contrasted with the episodic *Locrine* (1591, pr. 1595), in which the clown Strumbo first appears as a cobbler. The scene opens with Strumbo, his wife Dorothy, and Trompart mending shoes and singing “we Coblers lead a merie life.” It seems clear that husband and wife are equals when Dorothy sings, “Most happy men we Coblers bee” and Strumbo refers to “our shop” (ll. 585, 589). Trompart urges Dorothy to “Drinke to thy husband” (l. 599) and she does so, after which she is silent for the rest of the scene and appears no more in the play. Her function here seems to be to establish that Strumbo’s domestic life is carefree before he is conscripted into the army, but in doing this the playwright presents Dorothy as both a shop wife and fellow cobbler. In a third early play, Robert Yarington’s *Two Lamentable Tragedies* (1594, pr. 1601), Merry is a tavernkeeper and Rachel is his sister who helps him in the tavern but also keeps house for him. One of the play’s “tragedies” is the historical event of Merry’s murder of a competitor and its consequences. Rachel is eventually executed with her brother for
helping him to hide the evidence of his guilt. She appears in the shop, but as Merry’s accomplice rather than his business partner.14 In all of these early plays, although the shop world context is an important element of the plot and characterization, the shop women are not noteworthy as such.15

The particular theatrical convention I am tracing seems to have originated with Thomas Heywood’s 1 King Edward IV (1599, pr. 1600), which is partly a dramatization of that king’s real-life conquest of Jane Shore, a goldsmith’s wife. Significantly, many of the elements introduced in this play reappear in later treatments of similar material, but without the limitations imposed by historical events. That is, while the Jane Shore character might well be the basis for later shop wife figures, they can and do resist following in her footsteps. This play’s first shop scene begins, “Enter two prentizese preparing the Goldsmiths Shop with plate”; and soon after, “Enter Mistris Shoare with her worke in her hand.” She commands the apprentice: “Sir boy, while I attend the shop myself, / See if the workmen haue dispatcht the cup” whereupon “The boy departs, and she sits sowing in her shop. Enter the king disguised.”16 Noteworthy is how Heywood creates a commercial setting for Jane and establishes that she is in charge of the shop. At the same time, however, she is specifically described as having “work in her hand” and “sewing,” a domestic task practiced by women both offstage and on.17 The visual thus emblematizes the duality and potential conflict embodied in the role of a “shop wife.” King Edward enters disguised because, having already seen Jane at a dinner party hosted by her husband, he intends to seduce her. As he enters looking for the shop his words help to generate a vivid impression of the London location and setting: “Soft; here must I turn; / Heres Lombard Streete, and heres the Pelican; / And there’s the phoenix in the pelicans nest.” He then describes Jane as if she were a piece of jewelry displayed for sale—her eyes are diamonds, for instance. Jane, both a good wife and attentive shopkeeper, addresses him as a potential customer: “What would you buy, sir, that you look on here?” (p. 64). The ensuing exchange between them consists of her trying to sell a ring and him wanting her “hand,” to the point where the dialogue becomes seductive wordplay on buying and selling. Later in the scene, King Edward leaves after being recognized by the returning Shore, whose jealous question is voiced in language similar to the king’s, but from a husband-shopkeeper’s point of view: “Keep we our treasure secret, yet so fond / As set so rich a beauty as this is / In the wide view of euery gazers eye?” (p. 68). After much resistance, Mistress Shore eventually agrees to become the king’s mistress, as the audience doubtless knew she must. But Heywood seems particularly to stress how Jane’s changed circumstances serve to increase not only her status but also her role as a figure of commerce. At the end of the play she is shown being approached by supplicants who try to “buy” her with bribes to intervene for them with the king; the language of her insulted response betrays her shopkeeper origins, but it also conveys her
power: “What think ye that I buie and sell for bribes / His highness fauour, or his subiects blood?” (p. 82). Many of the elements in Edward IV reappear in later plays, especially a female in charge of a shop and a customer whose purpose is seduction. When history is not a determinant, however, the woman is usually far less compliant. Nevertheless, it is worth keeping the story of Jane Shore in mind, since it remains as a referent just below the surface of many of the subsequent treatments of women in shops.

Thomas Dekker’s The Shoemaker’s Holiday (1599, pr. 1600), probably written soon after Heywood’s play, has a similar scene with a wife minding the shop and sewing as a man approaches: “Enter Iane in a Semsters shop working, and Hamond muffled at another doore, he stands aloofe.” Ham mond echoes King Edward: “Yonders the shop and there my faire loue sits.” During this admiring speech he observes, “How prettily she workes, oh prettie hand! / Oh happie worke, it doth me good to stand / Unseen to see her.” He describes how he admires her in the shop from “afar”: “Muffeled Ile passe along, and by that trie / Whether she know me” (ll. 1, 13–15, 20–21). Like Jane Shore, her namesake here gives the recognizable call of a real London shopkeeper: “Sir, what ist you buy? / What ist you lacke sir? callico, or lawne, / Fine cambricke shirts, or bands, what will you buy?” An aside from Ham mond establishes his interest in her sexual goods: “That which thou wilt not sell, faith, yet lie trie” (ll. 21–24). Again like Edward, he soon asks, “how sell you then this hand?” (l. 27). During the long wooing scene between them, Jane repeatedly refuses Ham mond’s advances, protesting (surely with Jane Shore in mind) that her husband, Rafe, is away at war but still alive and “Whilst he liues, his I live, be it nere so poore, / And rather be his wife then a kings whore” (l. 78–79). Later, believing her husband to be dead, Jane agrees to marry Hammond, but Rafe returns and intervenes before the wedding. The contrast between these two early treatments of a shop wife is telling: in one, historical events dictated the socially superior seducer’s success; in the other, fantasy dictates his failure. Dekker’s Jane is a wife who remains true, even to an absent husband.

Having begun with two plays in quick succession, the brief and minor fad for theatrical shop scenes flourishes from about 1602 to 1613 with a group that seems to be aware of what might be called the Jane Shore paradigm, while repeatedly reworking and complicating it in such a way as to counter expectations associated with it. The first of these is another play from Thomas Heywood, The Fair Maid of the Exchange (1602, pr. 1607), a title that encapsulates the idea at the heart of the shop scenes surveyed here. The maid, Phillis (possibly the daughter of the “mistress” to whom she refers), is presented as being in charge of a shop in the Royal Exchange, a London microcosm of buying and selling. She scolds her apprentice for wasting time and threatens to beat him with the yard. As they “Sit and worke in the shop,” two men enter and approach it; Phillis calls out “What lacke you Gentle-
men?” to which Gardiner replies, “Faith nothing, had I thee. / For in thine eye all my desires I see.” She tries to interest him in the merchandise, but he wants her: “let me weare / This shape of thine, although I buy it deere.” \(^{19}\) In the exchange that follows, Phillis matches wits with Gardiner, calling him a “stall-troubler” (l. 1262—perhaps a type familiar to the audience), until he angrily departs. Interestingly, one reason for Phillis’s refusal of Gardiner’s advances is that she is in love with Cripple, who is himself a shopkeeper and whose shop Phillis has already visited, in a reversal of the usual formula of a man “shopping” for a woman. In a later scene, Phillis again takes the initiative and goes to Cripple’s shop where, unknown to her, she sees Frank, another of her suitors, in Cripple’s clothes (at the latter’s behest). Sounding very much like the conventional male shop customer, Phillis says, “yonder sits the wonder of mine eye” (l. 1991), after which she approaches and tells him she loves him. Still later, after many complications and by a circuitous route, Frank is offered Phillis by her mother—whose language certainly suggests a shopkeeper’s mind: “Disdaine her not because I proffer her, / I tell you sir, Merchants of great account / Haue sought her loue, and Gentlemen of worth, / Haue humbly sunde to me in that behalfe” (ll. 2360–63). A bargaining session ensues between parents and suitor that indicates how completely Phillis is a “maid of the Exchange,” an impression which her about-face rejection of Cripple and acceptance of Frank only confirms.

In Wise Woman of Hogsdon (1604, pr. 1638), Heywood returns to the visual formula of a woman sewing in a shop: “Enter Luce in a [Goldsmith’s] shop, at worke vnpon a lac’d Handkercher, and Joseph a Prentice”; again the woman is a daughter. When she asks Joseph her father’s whereabouts, he replies, “Mistresse, above, / And prayes you to attend below a little.” She voices her reluctance to do so in terms that emphasize both the idea that such shop women are “on display” and the potential danger this creates:

\[\begin{align*}
I & \text{ doe not love to sit thus publikely:} \\
& \text{And yet upon the traffique of our Wares,} \\
& \text{Our provident Eyes and presence must still wayte.} \\
& \text{Doe you attend the shop, Ile ply my worke.} \\
& \text{I see my father is not jelous of me,} \\
& \text{That trusts mee to the open view of all.} \\
& \text{The reason is, hee knowes my thoughts are chast.} \\
& \text{And my care such, as that it needes the awe} \\
& \text{Of no strict Overseer.}
\end{align*}\]

When Boyster comes to the shop Luce tells Joseph to serve him, but Boyster addresses her: “Tis heere that I would serve him, but Boyster addresses her.” She innocently replies, “What doe you meane sir, speak, what ist you lack? / I pray you wherefore doe you fixe your eyes / So firmly in my face? what would you have?” (p. 285). Of
course he wants her: he woos, she refuses, he leaves. Then another suitor, Chartely, enters with gifts, hoping to seduce Luce into becoming his mistress; she, however, successfully bargains for a proposal of marriage, to which she responds in the language of trade: “in exchange / Of this your hand, you shall receive my heart” (p. 288). This sequence of customer-suitors effectively conveys how women in shops were perceived to be vulnerable to seduction; at the same time, though, it suggests that such women had not only the “business sense” but also the freedom to strike a deal to their advantage.

1 The Honest Whore (1604, pr. 1604), by Dekker and Thomas Middleton, has one of the few shop scenes not set in London. But perhaps the Milan location is ironic, since Viola, the shopkeeper Candido’s wife, complains because her husband will not get angry or jealous (singularly un-Italian!). She asks her brother, Fustigo, who is unknown to Candido, to visit their shop and pretend to seduce her. The audience gets a shop scene—“Enter Candido, his Wife, George, and two Prentices in the shop: Fustigo enters, walking by”—but the convention of the vulnerable shop wife is rather explicitly subverted when this one organizes her own apparent seduction. The playwrights further undermine expectations when the avowedly “patient” Candido is either too dim or too phlegmatic to be gulled. Indeed, the ironies increase because he seems to be more concerned with making a sale at any cost than with losing his wife. Dekker’s sequel, 2 The Honest Whore (1605, pr. 1630), is also set in Milan, but Viola is dead and Candido has a new wife. The shop scene begins: “Enter at one doore Lodouico and Carolo; at another Bots, and Mistris Horsleach; Candido and his wife appeare in the Shop.” The first four talk amongst themselves, then Lodovico says, “Stay, is not that my patient Linen Draper yonder, and my fine yong smug Mistris, his wife?” (3.3.19–20). When Carolo voices an interest in the wife, Mistress Horseleach, a bawd, offers to distract Candido while the men approach the wife. So this time it is the husband who calls “What is’t you lacke, Gentlewoman? Cambricke or Lawnes, or fine Hollands? Pray draw neere, I can sell you a penny-worth” (ll. 33–34). But when the wife is approached by Bots, she immediately refuses his overtures and exits. In fact, then, although these two plays use the idea of the vulnerable shop wife, the effect is ironic: in the first the wife is not seduced and in the second, not seduceable. It seems worth asking whether the playwrights, by capitalizing on audience expectations, are questioning their validity; that is, does the treatment of the shop women in these plays implicitly acknowledge that in the real shops of Jacobean London women were also often more powerful than victimized?

Michaelmas Term (1604–06, pr. 1607) is Middleton’s first uncollaborative play set in the London shop-world—although Quomodo is as much a trickster-usurer as a shopkeeper. While there are no stage directions for his shop, the dialogue places the action there and merchandise is shown, so probably this is an instance of Middleton’s typically minimalist directions. In the first
of the scenes almost certainly set in the shop (2.3).—Quomodo—who has observed of the gentry, “They’re busy ’bout our wives, we ’bout their lands” (1.1.107)—enters to find his wife in conversation with another woman. He seems to establish his authority, sexual and otherwise: “How now, what praying have we here? Whispers? Dumb shows? Why, Thomasine, go to; my shop is not altogether so dark as some of my neighbors’, where a man may be made cuckold at one end, while he’s measuring with his yard at tother” (2.3.31–35). Soon after, as Quomodo begins his gulling of Easy, he tells his wife to leave; Thomasine replies, “Why, I hope I may sit i’th’ shop, may I not?” (l. 75). When he insists, she exits with an aside, “Well, since I’m so expressly forbidden, I’ll watch above i’th’ gallery, but I’ll see your knavery” (ll. 78–79). Thomasine’s subsequent presence above both visually establishes her as a figure of power and gives her knowledge that she later uses to trick her husband and seduce Easy. Indeed, rather than being staged or perceived as a commodity, this shop wife actively offers herself to one of her husband’s customer-victims. Her forced return to Quomodo at the end is presented as a victory for neither.

What is probably the best known shop scene is also unique: Middleton and Dekker’s Roaring Girl (1611, pr. 1611) is the only play with anything like the direction “Three shops open in a rank: the first a pothecary’s shop, the next a feather-shop, the third a sempster’s shop: Mistresse Gallipot in the first, Mistresse Tiltyard in the next, Master Openwork and his Wife in the third. To them enters Laxton, Goshawk and Greenwit.” Worth noting is the multiplication of everything, including shop wives, all of whose names have bawdy connotations. In addition, with its “rank” of three shops displaying merchandise, it is emphatically a place where goods are bought and sold. This commercial setting is the visual and thematic context for all that happens in this long scene, which begins with Mistress Openwork calling “Gentlemen, what is’t you lack?” (l. 1). But the three men approach Mistress Gallipot’s shop and the ensuing exchange between Mistress Gallipot and Laxton establishes a secret relationship that amounts to Laxton pretending he loves her, her giving him money, and him spending it on other women. Here as in other plays the husband is a victim, but now so too is the wife. Multiplicity allows for a contrast between the Gallipots and Openworks: in the latter partnership Mistress Openwork clearly has the upper hand in both the marriage and the business. When Moll Cutpurse enters and moves from shop to shop, it is worth noting that, on the one hand, she is a rare female shop customer, while on the other, she is seen as a sexual threat. When Moll is greeted by Openwork, his wife exclaims, “How now, greetings, love-terms with a pox between you, have I found out one of your haunts? I send you for hollands, and you’re i’th’ low countries with a mischief. I’m served with good ware by th’ shift, that makes it lie dead so long upon my hands, I were as good shut up shop, for when I open it, I take nothing” (ll. 204–9). Of
course this is double entendre, but it has a literal meaning too, which again suggests that this is a shop wife with considerable authority, who responds very differently to Moll than to the male customers. Moll replies that she “come[s] to buy” but Mistress Openwork is adamant: “I’ll sell ye nothing; I warn ye my house and shop” (ll. 213–14). Since one of the explicit concerns of this play is the perception and treatment of women in contemporary London, it is noteworthy that Moll, whose sexual ambiguity affords her an unusual degree of independence, first appears with two wives whose positions in a shop also give them a certain power over their husbands.

Moll (or Mall) Cutpurse is again a character in Nathan Field’s *Amends for Ladies* (1610–11, pr. 1617). This time unthreateningly androgynous, Mall comes to Seldom and his wife Grace “working as in their shop,” and having engineered Seldom’s departure by asking for “hangers” she has ordered, then gives Grace a letter from a knight. Grace rejects the implication that she would stray, but then Lord Proudlie enters, asking permission to “take a pipe of tobacco” (l. 66) in the shop. Seldom is only too accommodating: “Seldom hauing fetch a candle, walk’s off at th’ other end of the Shop, Prov’d. sits by his wife” (ll. 71–72). When Proudlie “whispers to Grace,” Seldom observes complacently, “This custome in vs Cittizens is good, / Thus walking off when men talk with our wiues, / It shew’s vs curteous, and mannerly” (ll. 84–86). Grace rebuffs Proudlie’s attempts at seduction and when she and Seldom are again alone, says “I wonder Sir you will walke so and let anie bodie sit prating to your wife! were I a man Id’e thrust ’em out ot’h shop by the head and shoulders” (ll. 159–61). This husband-shopkeeper’s response is that he knows his wife is virtuous so there is no danger, and if he did as she suggests, he would “loose their custome” (l. 163). Given the title of this play, one wonders if Field was deliberately going against the view quoted earlier that a shopkeeper who put his wife on display to attract customers virtually ensured his being cuckolded. That it is a virtuous wife and not a jealous husband who prevents this, tellingly counters two popular stereotypes. Contemporaneously with *Roaring Girl* and *Amends for Ladies*, John Cooke’s *Greene’s Tu Quoque* (1611, pr. 1614) reworks the conventions yet again. It begins with “A Mercers Shop discovered, Gartred working in it, Spendall walking by the Shop: Master Ballance walking over the Stage: after him Longfield and Geraldine.” Spendall is not the husband but an apprentice, who has been left with his mistress Gartred to run the shop because his master is off being knighted. Spendall is in front of the shop to drum up business; indeed he, like Candido, Seldom, and even Quomodo, is so eager to make a sale that he is easily gulled into leaving the woman alone and vulnerable—like a piece of merchandise to be shoplifted. But although Gerald tries to seduce Gartred, she resists, once more suggesting that being in charge of a shop and therefore having a certain independence could give a woman power to hold her own against such advances.
Middleton’s *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1613, pr. 1630) comes at the end of the sequence of plays from the early years of James I’s reign that feature shops and those who run them. As often with Middleton, his treatment of a convention implies both an awareness of it and a desire to use it for his own, usually ironic, purposes of social commentary. Here there is only one shop scene, but it starts the play—“Enter Maudline and Moll, a shop being discovered”—firmly establishing the concern with buying and selling that dominates the action. Yellowhammer, whose wife and daughter these are, is, like Jane Shore’s husband, a goldsmith in Goldsmiths’ Row in Cheapside, probably the most exclusive street of shops in the real London of the audience. A contemporary verse by Henry Parrot captures an attitude to young women in these shops to which Middleton’s punning title also alludes:

A scoffing mate, passing along Cheapside,  
Incontinent a gallant lass espied;  
Whose tempting breasts (as to the sale laid out)  
Incites this youngster thus to gin to flout.  
“Lady,” quoth he, ‘is this flesh to be sold?’  
“No Lord,” quoth she, “for silver nor for gold  
But wherefore ask you?” (and there made a stop).  
“To buy,” quoth he, “if not, shut up your shop.”

In the play it immediately becomes clear that mother and daughter are at odds because, as the title suggests, the daughter will not market herself for an upwardly mobile marriage. Simply by locating this exchange in the shop, Middleton highlights how Moll is seen by her parents as a commodity to be polished for sale—an idea emphasized by Maudline’s remark to her: “You dance like a plumber’s daughter and deserve / Two thousand pound in lead to your marriage, / And not in goldsmith’s ware” (1.1.21–23). When Sir Walter Whorehound enters with a whore he plans to market as a Welsh gentlewoman, he echoes this view: “I bring thee up to turn thee into gold, wench, / And make thy fortune shine like your bright trade; / A goldsmith’s shop sets out a city maid” (ll. 100–102). The allusions to Jane Shore are apparent, but Moll successfully resists the overtures of Whorehound, the knight her parents want her to marry. Ironically, however, although she marries Touchwood Junior for love, she gets money and social position too. The play ends with Yellowhammer happily inviting all present to Goldsmiths’ Hall to celebrate the marriage. As often in Middleton, the sinners are rewarded; here he also manages to create a sympathetic goldsmith’s daughter who will not be sold like a piece of jewelry.

The next shop scene appears in Dekker’s *Match Me in London* (1611–13, pr. 1631). Despite a gap of some years, it includes what seems yet another direct echo of *Edward IV*. In this case Lady Dildoman, a pandress, interests
the king in Tormiella, the new wife of a shopkeeper, and the king decides to go in disguise to see her. When they come to where Tormiella sits silently, minding the shop with two apprentices in her husband’s absence, the king asks to try a glove on her hand. Throughout the scene, Tormiella is demurely reticent, leaving most of the bargaining to an apprentice, although it is clear that the king’s interest is in her, not the merchandise. To continue the king’s seduction away from the shop, Lady Dildoman tries to tempt Tormiella with “rich embroidered stuff” they have elsewhere, but she resists: “My Husband is from home, and I want skill / To trade in such Commodities, but my man / Shall wait upon your Ladiship.” Only after she is tricked into going alone with them does she leave the shop and put herself in jeopardy. In the next scene the ironic contrast between Tormiella’s innocent resistance to temptation and the behavior of other shop wives, notably Jane Shore, makes for some very titillating and effective theater. Once she realizes the king’s intentions, Tormiella cries “Ile kill ten Monarches ere Ile bee one whore” (2.2.59). In a plot too complicated even to summarize, Tormiella, forced to live in the palace, is confronted by the jealous queen with an accusation that surely reflects attitudes to the growing presence and prosperity of shopkeepers in Dekker’s London. The queen says that the court has gone

to th’ shop of a Millaner,
The gests are so set downe, because you ride
Like vs, and steale our fashions and our tyres,
You’l haue our Courtiers to turne shopkeepers,
And fall to trading with you, ha!

(3.3.20–24)

Interestingly, like both of Dekker’s Honest Whore plays this is set in Spain (despite the title). Whether deliberate or not, the implicit ironic contrast between English and Spanish shop wives adds to the impression that London women have freedoms others do not and take advantage of them. In this play, although Tormiella is forced into the king’s bed, she never goes willingly. As a result, the king finally repents: his concluding words express his amazement and invite the audience to share it: “well were that City blest, / that with but, Two such women should excell, / But there’s so few good, th’ast no Parallel” (5.5.86–88).

Middleton provides yet another ironic take on the shop scene in Anything for a Quiet Life (1621, pr. 1662), his only collaboration with John Webster. The first stage direction for the shop is “Enter (a Shop being discover’d) Walter Chamlet, his Wife Rachel, two Prentices, George and Ralph,” although Rachel does not actually enter until a few lines later, thus marking a break from the convention of the woman being first seen sitting in the shop. Indeed, her entering words are in response to George’s call of “What ist you
lack?” Coming to the shop like a customer, she replies, “I do lack Content Sir, Content I lack: have you or your worshipful Master here, any Content to sell?” Her surprised husband asks, “How didst thou get forth? thou wer’t here sweet Rac. / Within this hour, even in my very heart.” Rachel is angry because she believes (wrongly) that Chamlet has fathered two “bastards”; her insistence that “though your shop-wares you vent / With your deceiving lights, yet your Chamber Stuff / Shall not pass so with me” ([C3v]) makes clear the equation of “shop wares” and “chamber stuff.” Through much of the play, Chamlet tries to make Rachel see reason, which he finally manages to do with the help of his apprentice, George, whom Rachel has earlier fired—in a significant demonstration of her power and authority. A shop wife who suspects her husband of adultery rather than being tempted or committing it herself is clearly a danger to business in this twisted version of an established, even tired, convention.

The last play incorporating the formula is Richard Brome’s much later A Mad Couple, Well Matched (1639, pr. 1653), with some complex and extended shop scenes that could well be ironic responses to a dated dramatic cliché. Although there is no stage direction, the dialogue and use of props indicate that 2.1 takes place in the shop of Saleware, yet again a goldsmith. The scene begins with the wife, Alicia, in charge and making a sale to Lady Thrivewell. When a suitor, Bellamy, attempts seduction, a willing Alicia observes about her absent husband and other shop owners: “They pretend onely that wee should overlooke our servants, when they but set us there for shew to draw in custome: but in making us such overseers they are overseene themselves; Shopkeepers-wives will be meddling and dealing in their kinde, and as they are able, as wel as their husbands.” To her eavesdropping apprentice Alicia says, “Pray attend you the tother end o’ th’ Shop. If I cannot handle a Customer, why dos your Master trust mee?” (p. 25). Soon Alicia is making overtures to Bellamy, telling him that if he is afraid of being overheard, he can whisper: “But that is a right shop-whisper indeed with Trades-women that are handsome” (p. 26). Later, she tells her husband, “Thomas, your hopes are vaine, Thomas in seating mee here to overreach, or underreach any body,” then departs saying, “let your shop be your own care for the rest of this day. I have some busines abroad” (pp. 29–30). Having become the mistress of Sir Oliver Thrivewell, Alicia begins to dress like a lady; blissfully unaware of the reasons for her changed appearance, Saleware imagines to his wife how some will “prate while others shall admire thee, sitting in thy shop more glorious, then the Maiden-head in the Mercers armes, and say there is the Nonparrell, the Paragon of the Citie, the Flower-de-Luce of Cheapside, the Shop Court-ladie, or the Courtshep Mistris” (p. 59). Alicia, however, is a shop wife who leaves to live in a house provided by Thrivewell; Saleware, wrongly assuming he is being invited to join her, worries “Must I then give up Shop, or lie so far remote?” But she responds, “No, you must keepe your
Shop Friend, and lie here if you please,” assuring him that “my Lord will bring and send you such custome, that your Neighbours shall envy your wealth, and not your Wife; you shall have such commings in abroad and at home, that you shall be the first head nominated i’ the next Sheriffe season, but I with my Lord will keepe you from pricking. Bee you a Citizen still Friend, ’tis enough I am Courtly” (pp. 59–60). Although perhaps not intentional, this is an ironically distorted replay of Jane Shore’s upward mobility in *1 Edward IV*, forty years earlier.

In a series of Characters published in 1631, Francis Lenton describes “A Sempster Shopkeeper”:

She is very neatly spruced up and placed in the frontispiece of her shop, of purpose (by her curious habit) to allure some custom, which still increaseth and decreaseth as her beauty is in the full, or the wane. She hath a pretty faculty in presenting herself to the view of passengers by her rolling eyes, glancing through the hangings of tiffany and cobweb-lawn, that the travellers are suddenly surprised and cannot but look back, . . . and, in affection to her comeliness, must needs cheapen her commodity, where they are rapt into a bargain by her beauty. . . . In her trade, she is much troubled with stitches, amongst which, back-stitch is the most ordinary, easy, and pleasant to her; and if you cannot bargain for her ruffs in her shop, she will fit you with choice at your chamber, so you will pay her well for her pains.34

The sexual and—or therefore—commercial power of such a woman is readily apparent, and while the tone of this description does not overtly convey resentment, the innuendo at the end suggests that not only her sewing but also her body are available for money. In the dramatic shop scenes surveyed here, this attitude is repeatedly countered by showing shop women who are either aware of being used as lures for customers and resist, or who simply behave in such a way as to demonstrate the freedom from masculine control their position evidently gives them. While doubtless there were women in the shops of early modern London who sold themselves along with their merchandise, it is unlikely that they were in the majority. Rather more probable is that women in shops, who were the wives or daughters of shopkeepers or shop owners themselves, spent their days sitting in the shop doing what male shopkeepers did: selling goods to customers, buying the materials and making those goods, and delivering purchases to customers, as well as managing the family household. Rather than being denied or distorted in theatrical shop scenes, this reality is the basis for the depiction of women who demonstrate its implications for better and for worse.35

Notes


15. Interestingly, besides the two “cobbler” plays mentioned here, William Rowley’s later A Shoemaker, a Gentleman (1607–09, pr. 1638) also has a wife who although clearly part of the family business is also not perceived or treated as a sexual object. Perhaps shoemakers’ wives were another kind of stereotype?


20. Thomas Heywood, *The Wise-woman of Hogsdon*, in *Dramatic Works*, 5:284. The quarto direction is for a “sempster’s” shop, but in both the dramatis personae and dialogue Luce is described as a goldsmith’s daughter.


25. It is easy to imagine that men in the audience would have offered suggestive responses to this question, helping to emphasize the topicality and “realism” of the scene.


30. This is the usually accepted date, as given in the *Annals*, but Cyrus Hoy argues persuasively for a later date, 1620–21; see *Introductions, Notes, and Commentaries to Texts in “The Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker,”* 4 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 3:143–48.


32. Thomas Middleton and John Webster, *Anything for a Quiet Life* (London, 1662), [C3r].


34. Francis Lenton, *Characterismi: Or, Lentons Leasures*; qtd. in *London in the Age of Shakespeare*, 327.

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