



2004

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Lisa Beauchamp  
*St. Francis Xavier University*

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### Recommended Citation

Beauchamp, Lisa (2004) "Wedding Vows and Coffins: Canticles' Rhetoric, the Liturgical Form of Matrimony and Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1613)," *Quidditas*: Vol. 25 , Article 8.  
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rmmra/vol25/iss1/8>

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**WEDDING VOWS AND COFFINS: CANTICLES'  
RHETORIC, THE LITURGICAL FORM OF MATRIMONY  
AND MIDDLETON'S A CHASTE MAID IN CHEAPSIDE  
(1613)**

*Lissa Beauchamp*  
*St. Francis Xavier University*

The concluding scene of Thomas Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* begins as a double funeral procession and turns into a wedding as the lovers rise from their coffins to be married; but what are coffins doing in a wedding scene? The coffins, as an onstage sign of the metamorphosis of funeral into wedding, are the emblematic focus for this paper. This investigation exposes the resonances of Canticles' erotic betrothal and Revelation's matrimonial fulfilment as a rhetoric common to both theatrical rituals and to ecclesiastical scriptures.<sup>1</sup> After briefly introducing what I call Canticles' rhetoric – Canticles itself, its exegesis, and its typological connections with Revelation—I will then examine how this rhetoric informs the wedding ritual in the *Book of Common Prayer*'s "Fourme of Solempnizacion of Matrimonye."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Canticles is also known as the Song of Songs, or the Song of Solomon. Though many critics often confuse the issue by referring to Canticles as the biblical epithalamion or wedding song, the verses do not include a wedding; the consummation is clearly that of betrothal, and the matrimonial imagery associated with Canticles is an exegetical rhetoric that actually draws on imagery of the wedding feast in the Book of Revelation. Further discussion elaborates below.

<sup>2</sup> *The Prayer-Book of Queen Elizabeth, 1559* (Edinburgh: John Grant, 1909), 122-128. The Prayer-Book remained substantially consistent with the 1559 edition throughout Elizabeth's and into James' reign, at least until 1623 when it was somewhat

The sense of apocalyptic resurrection and eroticized reunion that are present in the liturgy then go some way toward explaining Middleton's funeral/wedding scene as an appropriate way to conclude his city comedy: the coffins as stage properties represent a liturgically adopted scriptural allegory of betrothal and marriage. Specifically, the coffins evoke the apocalyptic echoes of marriage rather than simply sin and corruption, and the apocalypse in Middleton's city comedy is both ironically deferred and satisfyingly present.

Moreover, staging a wedding beside the coffins, from which two lovers have just risen, comments on the intimate relationships between the worldly matters of courtship and marriage, and the more mystical associations between the world and the redemption of the apocalypse. The latent performative possibilities of the liturgy provide a way to recognize these relationships between practice and exegesis. John R. Gillis notes that though "The church service, now at the altar rather than the porch, was the least important part of a ... [sixteenth-century] wedding", couples invested considerable significance in the private negotiations of engaging in matrimony:

Betrothal allowed them time to consider themselves as a pair; now the wedding rites would clarify their broader responsibilities as heads of family and household. It focused on and completed their [domestic] separation from family, from friends, and from the subordinate status of the unmarried ... Each marriage was a political event in the life of the community, for it redistributed power as well as status and economic resources.<sup>3</sup>

The wedding, therefore, is a public ritual of recognition that legitimizes the more important process of courtship and betrothal;

expanded. All references to the matrimonial ceremony refer to the 1559 edition by page number.

<sup>3</sup> Gillis, *For Better, For Worse: British Marriages, 1600 to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 62, 57.

more importantly, it is the nature of courtship that determines the nature of the marriage, and the wedding is a ritual that signals the couple's particular mutual promises for the community.

This attribution of greater value to the betrothal, rather than the wedding ritual itself, reflects a Reformation development of a late-medieval shift in terms of Canticles' exegetical trends. E. Ann Matter has established that, though historical allegories and apocalyptic readings were emphasized in the ecclesiologically-minded exegesis of the early church (4<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> c.), by the twelfth century the literal and tropological senses had become the focus:

[While] Song of Songs commentaries reflect changes in the perception of *Ecclesia* and 'her' major impediments in each period ... [t]here is a movement from a sense of 'inside/outside' [in the early and middle ages of the Church] to 'inside/*truly* inside,' in concert with the growing impact of the monastic ideal and related readings of the Apocalypse.... [By the twelfth century,] the Song of Songs was increasingly read as a dynamic guide to the quest of each human being for union with God[.] ... [furthermore, the] tropological or moral [sense] was not limited to the spiritually elite world of the cloister.<sup>4</sup>

Here we can see the roots of the Reformation principle of the personal encounter with scripture, and we can also see how the "quest of each human being for union with God" is related to the structure of *Ecclesia* as a guiding framework for each of her members. Canticles and Revelation, as representations of the betrothal and marriage of human and divine, are important examples of the Renaissance operation of tropology as a way of reading the present day: both historical allegories of spiritual legacy and the future of apocalyptic culmination are ways of recognizing the interpretive operation of the soul in the everyday conduct of domestic relationships.

In Middleton's play, furthermore, the social performances

<sup>4</sup> E. Ann Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity* (Philadelphia PA: U of Pennsylvania P, 1990), 109-111, 123.

of courtship and marriage open and extend the boundaries of scripture and liturgy to the playfulness of irony, when characters act out their everyday adaptations of scripture, and the audience's latent reactions reflect this model of responsiveness to scriptural and liturgical motifs. The theatrical audience, like the congregation of the liturgy, also performs its response to the drama of liturgical response; indeed, as Ramie Targoff points out, "By the early seventeenth century, to pray in the English church was always to perform."<sup>5</sup> The congregation, then, is potentially self-observing, and this suggests that audiences' and congregations' responses to the spectacle of ritual constitute a performance of interpretive self-recognition, mimicking the marginalia of exegesis as a textual annotation distinct, but inseparable from its "text."

Middleton's lively ironies throughout *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* juxtapose sacred and secular rituals in a way that reflects the rhetoric of Canticles and its extensive exegesis; in this way, the expected irony of marital infidelities in the play is qualified by a genuine affection between the married partners in the play, and the responsibility of acquiring community approval not only disrupts but also supports the intimate pleasures of Moll and Touchwood Jr.'s courtship. The corruption of the city of London is imbricated with apocalyptic resonance: though the threat of purging corruption echoes in the apocalyptic promise of the Lenten setting, there is also the implication that something present and valuable may be saved through the forms of the wedding itself.

### **Canticles' Rhetoric: Scriptural Motifs of Pleasure and Deferral**

It is important to note, first, that the medieval traditions of Canticles exegesis are an adopted legacy of interpretation in the English Renaissance, both in terms of the liturgy as well as in

<sup>5</sup> Ramie Targoff, *Common Prayer: The Language of Public Devotion in Early Modern England* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2001), 9. Though she focuses on the *Book of Common Prayer* and the liturgy, Targoff's argument suggests a number of valuable insights into theatrical performance through the analogy of congregation and audience.

popular secular forms like the theatre. John Foxe, for instance, in the *Book of Martyrs*, claims that the English Church derives directly from the Greek patriarchs and that the contemporary Roman Church has corrupted the heritage of the “true” Church in institutional ways.<sup>6</sup> Though monastic exegesis is not, strictly speaking, liturgical, monastic interpretations that have remained uncorrupted by Roman doctrines inform many of the liturgical forms of the English Church; and through the liturgy, exegesis also affects the visual and verbal practices of theatrical performances such as Middleton’s staging of *Moll and Touchwood Jr.’s* wedding as well as the dynamic of their courtship throughout the play. Indeed, the forms of interaction between scripture and marginal exegesis tend to mimic not only the vocal forms of liturgical worship, but the physically responsive forms in *Canticles* itself.

*Canticles* is an intensely erotic sequence of speeches that alternates between a male and a female who desire each other, though it is read as a spiritual allegory too, especially in terms of its typological connection with the wedding of the Bride and the Lamb in Revelation. Typology is a dialectical device of exegesis that links Old Testament promise to New Testament fulfilment; but when the fulfilment is itself an unfulfilled prophecy, as in Revelation’s wedding feast of the Bride and the Lamb, the narrative device of typology displaces the resolution of New Testament fulfilment to the perpetually deferred apocalypse. In this way, the Reformation emphasis of concluding exegetical readings with the tropological or moral sense renders the present day as the heart of both scriptural history and apocalyptic promise in the lyrical presence of reading scripture as an example of everyday conduct in the present. Exegetical reading is situated *in*

<sup>6</sup> John Foxe, *The Acts and Monuments of John Foxe*, ed. Rev. George Townsend, Vol. 1 (New York: AMS Press, 1965). After the prefaces in the Table of Contents, one of the first sections is entitled: “Acts and Monuments of Christian Martyrs, and Matters Ecclesiastical in the Church of Christ, from the primitive beginning, to these our days, as well in other countries, as, namely, in this realm of England, and also of Scotland, discoursed at large: and first, the Difference between the Church of Rome that Now Is, and the Ancient church of Rome that Then Was.”

*medias res*, and conflates the sense of “now” with the “not yet” that permeates scripture. This temporal conflation of past and future in the present moment is known as *parousia*, the guiding principle of Canticles’ rhetoric, in which multiple layers of interpretation are simultaneously and lyrically held together.<sup>7</sup> Tropological readings of Canticles that call upon the more immediate and immanent presence of Christ tend to invoke the eroticized negotiation of betrothal with the wedding of imminent divine presence in the apocalypse of Revelation, while yet insisting on the primary significance of the betrothal.

Usually, the “betrothed ones” of Canticles—Sponsus and Sponsa—are read as allegorical figures for Christ and the Church, though the Sponsa is also read as the Virgin Mary in mariological readings, and, increasingly from the twelfth-century onward, as the individual reading soul of the exegete. The Sponsa, the female lover of Canticles, figures the self-observing and self-interpreting human soul; she is desiring and desired, speaker and listener, both enclosed garden and opened body. The most commonly acknowledged allusion to feminine imagery from Canticles is the male lover’s description of his beloved object as a *hortus conclusus*: “A garden inclosed is my sister my spouse; a spring shut up, a fountain sealed” (Song 4:12).<sup>8</sup> In addition to this pastoral feminine image, Canticles also includes the Sponsa’s own description of herself as a radically opened subject: “Let my

<sup>7</sup> *Parousia* (Gk.) means, literally, “presence.” In a Christian context, it is usually meant to refer to the presence of Christ, both in eschatological terms and in terms of the apocalypse.

<sup>8</sup> All biblical quotations are taken from the King James Version of 1611. Spenser’s *Amoretti* and *Epithalamion*, Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis*, and Marvell’s “The Garden” are conventional examples for the use of Canticles’ sensual garden (or *hortus conclusus*) imagery in the period, though as I have mentioned already, her own self-ascribed openness is often neglected as part of the imagery. See Theresa Krier’s “Generations of Blazons: Psychoanalysis and the Song of Songs in the *Amoretti*,” *Texas Studies of Literature and Language* 40.3 (Fall 1998), 293-327; Stanley Stewart’s *The Enclosed Garden: The Tradition and the Image in Seventeenth-Century Poetry* (Madison WI: U of Wisconsin P, 1966); and Israel Baroway’s “The Imagery of Spenser and the Song of Songs,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 33 (1934), 23-45.

beloved come into his garden, and eat his pleasant fruits” (Song 4:16), and “I opened to my beloved” (Song 5:6). Ultimately, the female body of the Sponsa figures the paradoxical state of human existence as both enclosed object (body) and opened subject (soul). The importance of Canticles’ rhetoric is that it turns erotic and marital motifs toward the present moment of “reading rhetoric,” or the performative rhetoric of response, through the Reformation emphasis on tropology. The reading subject as the Sponsa is an enclosed body opened to discrete examination not only literally (as in anatomical studies, *i. e.* the scientific method of Bacon’s *Novum Organum*, or Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*) but figuratively, in terms of the psyche’s or soul’s openness to the divine.

Since the rhetoric of apocalyptic marriage, like marriage practices of the period, emphasizes the eroticized betrothal allegory of Canticles rather than the marital eschatology of Revelation, I will refer to this conjunction of motifs as Canticles’ rhetoric. Yet the distinctively conflated relationship between the two books of scripture is an important one in terms of how betrothals and weddings are considered in this period, as in my example of Middleton’s use of coffins and wedding vows. The distinctions between Canticles as betrothal and Revelation as wedding are often elided in critical discussions of scriptural wedding tropes, leading to the common ascription of wedding imagery to Canticles itself—a conflation that obviates the attribution of greater value placed on betrothal sequences rather than the marital situations that follow courtship and betrothal, as well as ignoring the apocalyptic resonances of the wedding.

In fact, Canticles is a predominantly pastoral lyric sequence of betrothal that is concluded only in the wedding of the Bride and the Lamb in Revelation, which is set in the apocalyptic city of the New Jerusalem. Recognizing the distinction between the two biblical sources, and how the distinction is traditionally elided, affords us the opportunity to see precisely how the coffins belong in a wedding scene: the setting of urban London develops the rural motif of betrothal while also prefiguring the apocalypse, situating London *in medias res*. The coffins embody the exegetical legacy



of *parousia* that links promised presence to deferred fulfillment, and this principle is incorporated in the abbreviated “Fourme of Solempnizacion of Matrimonye” that Middleton stages. As well, the coffins provide a compelling visual reminder of the importance of what distinguishes the wedding from the betrothal: the public recognition of the wedding form renders death as rebirth, renewing the desirable reward of eternal life through the individual connection with the larger Church community. But it is the human betrothal that makes this spiritual marriage possible: without the promise of mutually responsive and pleasurable interaction, neither wedding nor death fulfills anything.

### **Wedding Vows: liturgy and the spectacle of response**

The form of solemnizing marriage, as a liturgical spectacle, is a ritualized repetition: the wife and husband articulate their vows aloud in front of a congregation of witnesses, repeating them as instructed by the parson who then goes on to outline the roles that husband and wife undertake through this ritual performance. The roles of husband and wife described in the form of solemnization are part of “an excellent misterie” drawn from the erotic betrothal and promise of Canticles and its associated wedding trope in the Book of Revelation:

O God which haste co[n]secrated the state of matrimonie to suche an excellent misterie, that in it is signified and represented the spiritual mariage and vnitie betwixte Christe and his Church.<sup>9</sup>

The unity between Christ and Church as betrothed ones is rendered as a body, with Sponsus as head and Sponsa as the rest of the body. Despite current readings of gendered dominance and subordination in this body metaphor for marriage, however, it is an extension of the integrity of Christ and Church. This integrity is based on the model of the Sponsa as human female, opening through chosen

<sup>9</sup> *The Prayer-Book of Queen Elizabeth, 1559*, 126; see also *The Booke of Common Prayer: 1623* (Facsim. ed., Columbus OH: Lazarus Ministry Press, 1998), C4v.

consummation *after* mortal death (just as Moll and Touchwood Jr. are married *after* their faked deaths). The issue of gender as a performative representation is one that I shall return to, but first it is expedient to consider the matter of performative representation itself.<sup>10</sup>

Canticles' rhetoric offers a way to perceive the body and its mortality as a legible site of pleasure, both in the theatre and in the Church; corruption is the neglect of the soul's or head's contribution to the body's pleasure, a lack of proper correspondence between "interpretation" and "text." Reading pleasure as either virtuous or corrupted is the operation of the soul, and involves the administration of discretion – or, in sexual terms, chastity. This rhetoric of the body as a potentially self-reading text is supported by the analogy of the Book of Nature, which renders all human activity as "textual", i.e., to be read; theatrical performances and Church rites and rituals are therefore open to the same sort of rhetorical interpretations as scripture and literature are, since they depend on bodies to perform them.<sup>11</sup>

Theatre and liturgy, too, may "read" each other in the same way that exegesis reads scripture: the practice of interpreting the verbal exchanges of lovers in Canticles participates in that exchange by generating further textual commentary. Marginal annotation, rather than an entirely separate text, constitutes the exegete's awareness of her interpretive contribution and of her own rhetorical position in the scriptural text. In a similar way, the

<sup>10</sup> It is perhaps expedient to clarify that while I am arguing against readings of dominance and subordination in the head/body metaphor, such readings are not themselves invalid – they are simply not required readings. The ideal reading I propose here is also not an obligatory reading, nor is it necessarily more common in the period; but it offers the corrective that neither is an hierarchical reading necessary nor more common in an historical context.

<sup>11</sup> Ernst Robert Curtius writes of the "two books" of the medieval and early modern periods, "the *codex scriptus* of the Bible and the *codex vivus* of Nature," which provided a wealth of metaphorical tropes. For instance, the epigrammatist John Owen (1563?-1622) inverts the "book of the world" topos by calling his book a world (Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask [New York: Harper and Row, 1963], 322).

liturgical form is a reading of exegesis, just as Middleton's "reading" of the matrimonial form constitutes an awareness of his own response as itself a kind of spectacle. The forms of ritual and theatre, though both are spectacles, differ in terms of the script. In the liturgy, for instance, spouses repeat the same form that is used relatively invariably; they adopt archetypal roles that, as far as the verbal form goes, do not admit much in the way of character or dramatic development. Yet these ritually repetitious responses qualify as representations of conversation in that they concentrate attention and maintain an "encounter of a special kind" that includes non-verbal moves, as Erving Goffman maintains:

Words are the great device for fetching speaker and hearer into the same focus of attention and into the same interpretation schema that applies to what is thus attended. But that words are the best means to this end does not mean that words are the only one or that the resulting social organization is intrinsically verbal in character. Indeed, it is when a set of individuals have joined together to maintain a state of talk that nonlinguistic events can most easily function as moves in a conversation. ... [C]onversation constitutes an encounter of a special kind.<sup>12</sup>

The "special kind" of encounter that characterizes conversation ("talk") is what also characterizes the ritual responses of spouses as more than verbal replies to instruction: because they are inherently dramatic in nature rather than purely verbal, the ritual responses of couples represent an integral involvement in the liturgy at the altar. Furthermore, as Goffman points out, non-verbal moves signal the difficulty of designating the term "response" as opposed to "statement":

<sup>12</sup> Erving Goffman, *Forms of Talk* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1981), 70-71.

Standard sequences ... are not [always] sequences of statement and reply but rather sequences at a higher level, ones regarding choice with respect to reach and to the construing of what is reached for. ... In this way we could recognize that talk is full of twists and turns and yet go on to examine routinized sequences of these shiftings.<sup>13</sup>

In the wedding ritual, the “twists and turns” of conversational spectacle incorporate physical gestures, such as the taking of hands, the exchange of rings, and kisses, as significant conversational “moves.” At the altar of the Church, the couple’s interaction in the liturgy becomes a latent dramatic device for physical expression, expressing joy and delight as a kiss that signifies the couple’s new sovereign status.<sup>14</sup>

This point might seem obvious, if it were not for the critical construction of a necessary relation between the formal erasure of voice and agency that is a requirement of ritual and the social/political status of women and men. Predominant critical trends interpret the wife’s obedience and submission as enforced silence and subordination to the husband, but this is by no means a necessary interpretation, since the role of the wife is described in terms of an effective and eloquent ability to speak as a present and literal embodiment of *Ecclesia* as *Sponsa* to Christ. Though elided in the form of ritual (just like the husband’s), her symbolic agency and speech is what characterizes the virtue of obedience, and her submission to her husband, like the submission of a paper for publication, describes a discrete application of attention rather than subordination to unilateral control. Indeed, the “excellent

<sup>13</sup> Goffman, 73.

<sup>14</sup> It is worth noting that Canticles opens with the phrase “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine” (KJV, Song, 1:2). The “kisses of his mouth” have been interpreted in a variety of ways, not least of which is the “kiss of contemplation” which transmits divinely inspired eloquence. See excerpts from William of St. Thierry’s *Brevis Commentatio* or Alan of Lille’s *Elucidatio* in Denys Turner’s *Eros and Allegory: Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1995). Further discussion of kisses, and the theatrical effectiveness of the silence associated with them, continues in the next section.

misterie” of Canticles’ rhetoric is that it invokes the form of a lyric dialogue as a dwelling place or occupation: the discourse of courtship, both verbal and non-verbal, is an enclosed garden of sensual delights in which the lovers are open to each other.<sup>15</sup>

In the sense that Canticles itself is a lyric series of speeches, including a chorus of community witnesses, the vows of husband and wife symbolically imitate the conversational speech and agency of the Canticles lovers with regard to each other and in the social context of supportive witnesses. This articulated desire is an important feature of Canticles’ rhetoric because Canticles itself is a representation of speech: the lovers speak to and about each other, expressing their own desires through erotically evocative imagery. Indeed, the form of Canticles’ dialogue is reflected in its exegesis, in commentaries that speak to and of each other as well as articulating eroticized interpretations of scripture.<sup>16</sup> This representation of textual conversation symbolically is embedded in the matrimonial ceremony: the “conversation” of wives in the *Book of Common Prayer*’s matrimonial form identifies the domestic space of the new household as one that is analogous to the Church and which is characterized by conversation.

The ritual repetition of conversational speech in the

<sup>15</sup> The sexual connotations of the word “conversation” are supported by the derivation from the Latin *conversari*, to keep company or to frequent, and the Old French *converser*, to have (verbal) intercourse with. Webster’s Dictionary gives Francis Bacon as an example of the Renaissance use of the word: “experience in business and conversation in books” also connotes that conversation is an occupation or association esp. with an object of study or subject, a close acquaintance or intimacy. “Conversation” also implies frequent abode in a place, a manner of life, or dwelling in a place, as in KJV Phil. 3:20: “For our conversation is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ” – or Song 8:13: “Thou that dwellest in the gardens, the companions hearken to thy voice: cause me to hear it.” In this sense, the verbal and non-verbal conversation of marriage is what characterizes the domestic dwelling and the community that surrounds it.

<sup>16</sup> For examples of eroticized and self-reflexive exegesis of Canticles, see Denys Turner’s *Eros and Allegory: Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1995).

wedding ritual is therefore a particular kind of performance that represents a paradigm for domestic and social conversations. The lyric dialogue of Canticles and the rhetoric of textual commentary provide a model for the exchange of vows in the liturgy, which then establishes a dwelling place of and for speech in the domestic household. This conversation/place is therefore made safe and comfortable through the sustenance of conversation, including non-verbal moves that the liturgy performs.

Insofar as conversations may demonstrate the eroticized pleasures of exchange, rather than the politics of power (dominance and subordination), ritualized gestures and responses may also represent the verbal responsiveness that the Canticles lovers demonstrate and that is also the ideal of liturgical worship. Canticles' rhetoric of the pleasurable body is thus an important example of a "silent" rhetoric in which forms of speech need not disclose delight when the body itself may respond; this kind of silent pleasure, moreover, may be embodied in the liturgy not only through the exchange of rings and kisses but also through the individual variables of performance—tone of voice, manner of speech, facial expression, and spontaneous gestures.

A re-examination of the concept of "obedience" as a virtue of this kind of silent rhetoric of the body discloses a Renaissance notion of betrothal and marriage that is more consistent with the abundance of strong female characters on the stage. "Obey" derives from the Latin *oboedire*, from *ob-* to, towards and *audire*, to hear, and has the sense not only of compliance or ready attention, but also that of behaving or acting in accordance with one's own feelings, whims, etc. Obedience is a particular kind of responsiveness, an expression of openness submitted to another's attention, and as such the wife's vow to obey is at least potentially or ideally exchangeable with the husband's vow to comfort. Obedience in the liturgy of matrimony need not signal the oppression of female autonomy and may acknowledge a particularly "feminine" operation of social responsiveness that is desirable for men as well, insofar as men are also members of the Church/body with regard to Christ. In the vows themselves, the

wife symbolically responds to the husband's vow; he must first plight his troth before she will give him hers:

[Priest, to the husband] Wilt thou haue thys woman to thy wedded wyfe, to lyue together after Goddes ordynaunce in the holye estate of Matrimony? Wylt thou loue her, comforte her, honour, and kepe her, in sickenes, and in healthe? And forsakyng al other, kepe the onely to her, so long as you both shall liue? *The man shall aunswere*, I will. *Then shall the Priest say to the woman*, Wilt thou haue this man to thy wedded housband, to lyue together after Goddes ordynaunce in the holy estate of matrimony? wilt thou obey hym and serue him, loue, honour, and kepe him, in sycknes and in health? And forsakyng al other, kepe the onely to him so long as ye bothe shal liue[?] *The woman shall aunswere*, I will. ...

*And the Minster receiuyng the wouma[n] at her father or frendes handes, shall cause the man to take the woman by the right hand, and so either to geue their trouth to other, the man first saying.*

I. N. take the. N. to my wedded wife, to haue and to hold from thys day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for porer, in sickenes, and in healthe, to loue and to cheryshe, tyll death vs departe; according to Gods holy ordinaunce, and therto I plight the my trouth.

*Then shall they louse their handes, and the woman taking againe the man by the right hande, shall saie.*

I. N. take the. N. to my wedded husbande, to haue and to holde, from this day for ward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickenes a[n]d in health, to loue, cherish, and to obey, till death vs departe, accordyng to godes holy ordinaunce: and therto I geue the my trouth.<sup>17</sup>

The spoken acquiescence of husband and wife is largely identical in the solemnization: both simply respond "I will" and repeat their troths. But there are two subtle variations: the wife's vow substitutes "obey" for the husband's "comforte" in the otherwise identical pledge of duties, and where the husband "plights" his troth, the wife "gives" hers. To plight one's troth is

<sup>17</sup> *Prayer-Book 1559*, 123-124.

to pledge honour, security, and material protection; it is a security given for the performance of some action, and (unlike pledging or giving) never applied to property or goods—that is, the husband plights his soul to his wife.<sup>18</sup> Plighting is thus a specific act of spiritual engagement and betrothal that earns the wife’s obedience and her “giving” of her troth *in return*.

The exchange of vows also involves the taking of hands and the exchange of rings that confirms the verbal exchange in dramatic terms. The espoused couple remains silent thereafter as the priest elaborates the significance of the spoken and silent vows:

Ye housbandes loue your wiues, euen as Christ loued the Churche, and hath geuen hymselfe for it, to sanctifie it, purgyng it in the fountaine of water, throughe the worde, that he might make it vnto hym selfe a glorious congregacion, not hauyng spot or wrinkle, or any suche thyng, but that it shoulde be holy and blameles. So men are bounde to loue their owne wyues, as their owne bodies. He that loueth his owne wife loueth hym selfe. For neuer did any man hate his owne fleshe, but nourisheth and cherisheth it, euen as the Lorde doeth the congregacion, for we are membres of his body: of his flesh and of hys bones. ... This mistery is great, but I speake of Christe and of the congregacion. ... Ye housbandes, ... Geuyng honour vnto the wyfe ... as heires together of the grace of lyfe, so that your praiers be not hyndred. ...<sup>19</sup>

Though the husband’s role is described as analogous to Christ’s love of the Church, it is significant too that the figure of the Church here includes the husband as one of her members: as Christ loves the husband in the Church, so the husband should love his wife “of his flesh and of hys bones.” The wife is like the husband’s own body, “for neuer did any man hate his owne fleshe.” The flesh of the body – whether the wife’s or the husband’s – is neither corrupted nor corrupting but a virtuous and pleasurable site worth nourishing and cherishing, as well as

<sup>18</sup> See Webster’s Encyclopedic Dictionary.

<sup>19</sup> *Prayer-Book 1559*, 127.



deserving of the husband's sacrifice in *imitatio Christi*. Rather than placing the husband in a dominant position over the wife who must subordinate herself to him, the analogy here seems to suggest that the husband should be ready to subordinate his own desires for her comfort as Christ died for love of the Church, and as his vows indicate: he vows to comfort her in exchange for her vow to obey him. Thus, as the head, his role invokes a particular kind of ready attention or obedience to his wife as he would to his own body.

The wife's vow to obey her husband is therefore elaborated as a response to the degree of her husband's willingness to make sacrifices for her comfort, and her role reflects this active responsiveness to sacrifice his own desires in terms of responsible social interaction:

Ye women, submit youre selves vnto youre owne housbandes as vnto the Lorde: for the housbande is the wyues headde, euen as Christe is the headde of the Churche. And he [Christ] is also the sauioure of the whole bodye. Therefore as the Churche or congregacion, is subiecte vnto Christe. ... Let wyues be subiecte to their owne housbandes, so that if anye obey not the woorde, they may be wonne withoute the woorde by the conuersacion of the wyues ... so that the spirite be milde and quiete.<sup>20</sup>

The application of wives to their husbands is a conditional promise, dependant on his performance of his duty to her and her assessment of its value. The comfort or pleasure of the flesh that the husband cherishes in the wife is not subject to him but rather an object example for the congregation at large: "so that if *any*e [including husbands] obey not the word, they may be wonne withoute the woorde by the conversation of the wyues" (*italics mine*). Correspondingly, too a wife's conversation indicates the degree of comfort afforded to her, and the obedience of the Church to Christ is an ideal model for both spouses. "Conversation" here draws an implicit comparison between ecclesiastical and domestic

<sup>20</sup> *Prayer-Book 1559*, 127-128. See also 1623 ed., p. C4v and C5.

“dwelling places”: both may convert or transform disobedience into respectful social behaviour—both are identified with the generative body of the wife (rather than the sacrificial body of Christ).

The integral body of Christ and Church is the macrocosmic paradigm for both husbands and wives, as individuals who each have heads and bodies of their own and as a figure for the communal body to which they both belong: “*we* are membres of his body.” The metaphor of head and body is a connected metaphor here: Canticles’ Sponsus expresses desire for his beloved, not for his subordinate, and the evocation of Christ as Sponsus and thus as exemplary husband in the form of matrimony signals that Christ’s divine superiority over humanity is not a necessary issue here (though it may be elsewhere, such as in the general confession). Similarly, the Sponsa expresses desire for her lover, not as “lord and master” but as Queen to King, both of royal blood: “the King hath brought me into his chambers: we will be glad and rejoice in thee, we will remember thy love more than wine” (Song 1:4). The head is part of the body, and though at the top of it in a physical sense, the integrity of the whole body obviates the sense of dominance for which some feminist critics argue. If the head exerts dominance through the faculty of reason, then the whole organism of the body is compromised – just as an over-reliance on physical pleasures or suffering destabilizes the proper operation of reason.

While I am not arguing that the principle of “mutual affection” in marriage is uncomplicated by Renaissance practices, the obedience of the wife, like chastity and silence, corresponds to the self-sacrificing responsibilities of husbands. Feminist critics like Coppélia Kahn and Linda T. Fitz do not address the rhetoric of Canticles and the presence of Christ and Church in the vows; nor do they address how this principle is manifested in the husband’s and wife’s mutual duties to each other, instead focussing on a presumed equation between heads and hierarchical dominance.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> For instance, Coppélia Kahn, in her discussion of the Renaissance institution of marriage and the theatrical portrayal of women, admits that “under pressure

The bodily analogy for spouses is the basis for the erotic allegory of Christ as head and the Church as his desirable and desiring body, a body that experiences pleasure in concert with its head. In marriage, husband and wife enact this eroticized rhetoric in worldly terms, cherishing each other as sacred in imitation of Christ's love for the Church. The eroticized appeal for the divine is firmly based in the human body, including the head and the ability to reason, in a betrothal model for the relationship of marriage where genders represent complementary virtues: male and female are made one, as indivisible as the heart and head of each male or female individually.

The insistence that "Marriage is an immovable obstacle to any improvement in the theoretical or real status of women in law, in theology, in moral and political philosophy"<sup>22</sup> perpetuates the constructed paradigm of political power by dismissing the rhetoric of the "excellent misterie." In the Form, however, both spouses acknowledge obedience as the responsibility of establishing a space of mutual comfort for themselves within the supportive context of the community. Middleton's lovers, though apparently

of a new Protestant ideology of marriage," biblical interpretive models were changing; yet she still maintains that "Both woman and marriage are enfolded within the idea that man dominates woman." See also Linda T. Fitz, "'What Says the Married Woman?': Marriage Theory and Feminism in the English Renaissance" (*Mosaic* 13 [1980]: 1-22).

<sup>22</sup> Kahn, 247, qtg Ian Maclean, *The Renaissance Notion of Woman: A Study in the Fortunes of Scholasticism and Medieval Science in European Intellectual Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 66, 85. Incidentally, in citing Maclean, Kahn distorts his argument. After stating that "In all practical philosophy, the female sex is considered in the context of the paradigm of marriage", Maclean goes on to argue that "dislocations of a fundamental nature ... do occur" as a result of "the activities of queens, queen regents and court ladies, and the emergence of a class of women possessing leisure and the aspiration to fill it profitably. Claims that women have equal virtue and mental powers and an equal right to education become more strident throughout Europe after the middle of the sixteenth century" (Maclean, 66). Furthermore, in "theology, medicine and law" Maclean identifies satire that "is directed against an object other than women: socinianism, prejudice, academic ponderousness. In each case, the effect of the joke is to reinforce the contrary proposition: woman is a human being." Her status as a figure for satire is appropriate because "it will be evident to those to whom the satire is addressed that there is a discrepancy between what she is and what she is said to be according to traditional authorities" (Maclean 85-86).

disobedient to their superiors in their preference for each other, dramatize this sense of mutual responsiveness in their plot to convert the community to support their union. Though Touchwood Sr. says that “delight will silence any woman,” he also indicates that Moll will “find her tongue again” now that she may “keep house” – a house in which her husband, too, may “utter all at night” because it is supported by familial and social forms as well as discrete and private pleasure (5.4.52-54).<sup>23</sup>

### Coffins: theatre and the spectacle of response

Middleton’s literalized performance of scriptural tropes amplifies the play’s parody of the institution of earthly marriage: by including coffins on the stage during the wedding of Moll and Touchwood Jr. in the final scene, Middleton recognizes, re-appropriates, and emblemizes the reformed Church’s already re-appropriated tradition of linking Canticles and Revelation in the context of the human rite of matrimony.<sup>24</sup> Yet Middleton’s use of liturgical settings, however ironic, suggests his awareness of the common heritage of Church and theatre in that both may borrow performance strategies from each other perhaps more often than we acknowledge. Alizon Brunning, for instance, points out that “native English comedy ... has its roots in the medieval Church” and asserts that “*A Chaste Maid* incorporates all [the] major

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Middleton, *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, ed. by Alan Brissenden (London: New Mermaids, 2002). Subsequent references to the play will cite Act, Scene, and line numbers parenthetically as they appear in this edition.

<sup>24</sup> Peter Daly writes of “Emblematic stage properties as elements in the dramatic action,” when stage properties such as the coffins here can operate both as scenic elements alluding to a host of traditional correspondences as well as “play[ing] a significant role in the dramatic action” (Peter Daly, *Literature in the Light of the Emblem*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed [Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1998], 175). Coffins are often used in emblem books to indicate that the mortality of the body prefigures the immortality of the soul as the “betrothed one” or Sponsa of Christ. See, for instance, George Wither’s *A Collection of Emblemes* (1635), emblem 1.21, which pictures a coffin in a funeral procession and allegorizes the cyclical harvest of wheat as the regeneration of the human soul beyond death (*The English Emblem Book Project*, Penn State University Libraries Electronic Text Center, <http://emblem.libraries.psu.edu/home.htm> ).

elements of sacramental drama .... The plot moves from *tristia* to *gaudium*, a transformation from sorrow to joy” in the final scene.<sup>25</sup>

Brunning’s approach identifies what she calls “Protestant poetics” that criticize both Roman and Puritan sacramental notions equally in *Chaste Maid*; but this approach is limited by her notion of “Protestant poetics” and her imputation of this poetic to Middleton and the English Church, which had much in common with both Roman and Puritan camps.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, the boundaries of performative space are somewhat distinctive in Church and theatre, and forms of rhetoric and response are ambiguous in different ways. Theatrical performances involve the physical body as a variable means of articulation much more so than liturgical performances do, and though physical expression is often “silent” or unscripted, the staged incorporation of scriptural tropes in *Chaste Maid* depends on the analogy of Church and theatre as sites of spectacle. Where speech and gesture alike must be read by the congregation or audience, there is yet a greater flexibility to incorporate irony alongside redemption in the theatre. The theatrical spectacle conflates practices of morality and pleasure much more vividly and immediately than the liturgy does, and therefore Middleton’s staging of the apocalyptic wedding juxtaposes a wider spectrum of behaviours.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Brunning, “‘O, how my offences wrestle with my repentance!’: The Protestant Poetics of Redemption in Thomas Middleton’s *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*,” *Early Modern Literary Studies* 8.3 (January 2003), 2, 13.

<sup>26</sup> See also R. V. Young, *Doctrine and Devotion in Seventeenth-Century Poetry: Studies in Donne, Herbert, Crashaw, and Vaughan* (Cambridge UK: D. S. Brewer, 2000); Young argues that “religious poetry in seventeenth-century England was not rigidly or exclusively Protestant in its doctrinal and liturgical orientation” (Young, i).

<sup>27</sup> While various critics have noted the influence of liturgical and sacramental rituals in *A Chaste Maid*, to my knowledge no one has chosen to emphasize the use of betrothal and the matrimonial ritual beyond describing the hypocrisies of the already established marriages in the play. For a consideration of the “sacrament” of confession, see Alison Brunning’s “‘O, how my offences wrestle with my repentance!’: The Protestant Poetics of Redemption in Thomas Middleton’s *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*,” *Early Modern Literary Studies* 8.3 (January 2003); for an interesting and suggestive reading of the christening scene and the Lenten/Carnival setting, see Rick Bowers’

First performed in 1613, *A Chaste Maid* initially seems full of hypocritical variations on marital situations: Allwit panders his wife to Sir Walter Whorehound, the Kixes are childless until Sir Kix unknowingly panders his wife to Touchwood Sr. The Touchwoods themselves have too many children—some of them illegitimate—and so accept Sir Kix' generosity to support themselves, and the Yellowhammers are interested only in improving their material and social status by marrying off their children to morally corrupt shams. Moll Yellowhammer and Touchwood Jr., however, are "in love" despite parental opposition. Their presence together onstage is often silent, suggesting that their interaction is in a different mode than the apparently hypocritical examples elsewhere in the play. The lines they do speak imply they are contriving to be together behind their parents' backs—possibly fondling each other as well as passing notes—and that they are scheming far more than we can ascertain until the end.

Middleton's abbreviated wedding in 5.4 invokes the otherwise implicit apocalyptic context of human/divine relationship in the vows with the use of coffins as properties of the stage, and with a plot line that involves Moll and Touchwood Jr. faking their own deaths to get married with communal support. The couple demonstrates their mutual complicity in the betrothal intent of the wedding vows, an intent that is concealed by their lines (and the absence of lines) as well as revealed by their actions throughout the play. When the two lovers rise from their coffins to be wedded beside them, amidst the chorus of supporting witnesses, they visually summon the rhetoric of the betrothal promise in Canticles and its fulfilment in the wedding of Revelation. Act 5, scene 4 opens with the stage directions:

"Comedy, Carnival, and Class: *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*," *Early Modern Literary Studies* (January 2003).

*Recorders dolefully playing. Enter at one door the coffin of the gentleman, solemnly decked, his sword upon it, attended by many in black, his brother being the chief mourner. At the other door, the coffin of the virgin, with a garland of flowers, with epitaphs pinned on it, attended by maids and women. Then set them down one right over against the other, while all the company seem to weep and mourn; there is a sad song in the music room.*  
(5.4, p.101)

The flower-bedecked coffin of the virgin and her entourage of “maids and women” here offer a parodic contrast to the “daughters of Jerusalem” who attend the Sponsa in Canticles; similarly, the sword on Touchwood Jr.’s coffin echoes the martial metaphors of the Sponsus.<sup>28</sup> As well, the “chief mourner” is Touchwood Senior, who we learn shortly has been “in” on the lovers’ plot all along: he has helped the lovers in their failed attempt to elope in 4.2 and conveys the letter to Moll from the “dead” Touchwood Jr. in 5.2, after which she faints in order to set up her own “death.” After the ceremonial entrance onto the stage in 5.4, Touchwood Sr. delivers a eulogy, and asks the deliberately leading question:

*Touchwood Senior.* I cannot think, there’s any one amongst you,  
In this full fair assembly, maid, man, or wife,  
Whose heart would not have sprung with joy and gladness  
To have seen their wedding day?  
(5.4.23-26)

All respond that “It would have made a thousand joyful hearts” (5.4.27), whereupon Touchwood Sr. directs the couple to rise from their coffins: “Up then apace, and take your fortunes,/ Make these joyful hearts, here’s none but friends” (5.4.28-29). The lovers then “*rise from their coffins*” (editorial, but clearly implied, stage direction) to be married:

<sup>28</sup> See Song 1:5, 3:5, 4:4, 5:16, 6:4, 8:4.

*Parson.* Hands join now, but hearts forever,  
Which no parent's mood shall sever.  
[To Touchwood Jr.] You shall forsake all widows, wives, and  
maids;  
[To Moll] You, lords, knights, gentlemen, and men of trades;  
And if, in haste, any article misses  
Go interline it with a brace of kisses.  
*Touchwood Senior.* Here's a thing trolled nimbly. Give you  
joy brother,  
Were't not better thou should'st have her,  
Than the maid should die?  
*Mistress Allwit.* To you sweet mistress bride.  
*All.* Joy, joy to you both.  
*Touchwood Sr.* Here be your wedding sheets you brought  
along with you;  
you may both go to bed when you please to.  
*Touchwood Jr.* My joy wants utterance.  
*Touchwood Sr.* Utter all at night then, brother.  
*Moll.* I am silent with delight.  
*Touchwood Senior.* Sister, delight will silence any woman,  
But you'll find your tongue again, among maidservants,  
Now you keep house, sister.  
(5.4.36-54)

Moll and Touchwood Jr. are in fact silent thereafter. Again, the staging implication is that they take their winding/wedding sheets and "go to bed", though they need not leap into the coffins while onstage to underline the suggestion that they will do so at the soonest private opportunity: the parson's direction to make up for the hasty wedding with "kisses," and the couple's silence after line 52, imply that they do at least kiss.<sup>29</sup>

Despite the clear gesture toward scriptural traditions of the apocalyptic wedding in the presence of coffins onstage during a wedding, Middletonian critics prefer to underline his

<sup>29</sup> Christina Luckyj notes that in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, a kiss is mentioned as a way of silencing a character or characters (Luckyj, 'A moving Rhetoricke': Gender and silence in early modern England [Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002], 91).



detached and cynical wit as the anarchic power that defies containment by law and tradition, [emphasizing that] sexuality in city comedy is equated primarily with social disjunction and with sin.<sup>30</sup>

Stephen Wigler, for example, the only critic to my knowledge who seems to have granted more than passing reference to 5.4, demonstrates how many critics have dismissed the potential for a restorative rather than a purely satiric response to the scene as well as the play.

Wigler's premise is that "provocative stimulation increases tension and is only pleasurable insofar as it promises fulfillment, [therefore] our sexual tension is neither disguised nor subdued, and our self-awareness as an audience of voyeurs, experiencing the pleasures of others by observation and identification, becomes more acute"; he concludes that "Rather than celebrating rebirth and renewal, and thus evoking joy in its auditors, the finale of *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* evokes the soiled delight and discomfort characteristic of the play from the beginning."<sup>31</sup> Wigler privileges the notion of a monolithic discourse in which the "satisfaction" must be as literal as the stimulation. In this approach, the satire of "soiled delight and discomfort" cannot co-exist alongside genuine satisfaction and the comedic resolution of the wedding: the sacred rite and the profanity of pleasure must be antagonistic or at least mutually exclusive—yet Middleton does not exclude joy, delight, nor pleasure from this play.

Canticles' rhetoric, however, inscribes marital motifs and social virtues with erotic pleasure rather than limiting marriage, and the body, to the suffering of anxiety: apocalypse here does not necessarily mean fire and brimstone but also signals the redemption of humanity in the New Jerusalem, the Eden achieved

<sup>30</sup> Mary Beth Rose, *The Expense of Spirit: Love and Sexuality in English Renaissance Drama*, (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1988), 50.

<sup>31</sup> Stephen Wigler, "Thomas Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*: The Delicious and the Disgusting," *American Imago* 33.2 (Summer 1976), 210, 213.

through knowledge and the operation of virtue and virtuous choices. The inclusion of coffins on the stage at the end of *Chaste Maid* is therefore not only satirical, alluding to the punishment of the sinful. It is also reverential, invoking the marital motif of the apocalypse, when the souls of humanity are wed to the divine Sponsus, Christ, and are resurrected through that wedding as a newly integrated body where human and divine are no longer distinct. The present form of soul and body combined, and the union of male and female in the domestic relationship of marriage, are then prefigured promises of this apocalyptic union.

Middleton's comedy of too-literal representation of the immanent apocalypse in the young couple's coffins does not necessarily censure the spiritual ideal that is parodied. Instead, Middleton's drama of marriages that are yet socially functional, despite infidelity, censures the standards of conventional absolutes that are hypocritically discordant with practices. Moll's and Touchwood Jr.'s wedding within the community and with its approval seems to signal social renewal in the post-coffin scene, rather than merely "social disjunction and sin": if they can remain uncorrupted, they may be able to win their disobedient community "without the woordes by the conuersacion of the [Church] ... so that the spirite be milde and quiete." The spirit of mutual affection and due benevolence in marriage advocated by the Church is practicable too: the unexpected irony of extra-marital sex in this play is that it does not ultimately compromise any of the marital alliances, at least not for the couples themselves. Their corrupted marriages appropriately reflect their corrupted selves, which ironically validates the self-reflective operation of marriage.

Middleton's playful literalizing of this opened rhetoric—opening the coffins to wed the couple, for instance, as well as opening liturgical motifs to corrupt practices – is what makes his comic resolution so funny, and so interestingly resonant of scripture. As William Slights argued, the "incarnational comedy" of Middleton's plays uses "intentional incongruity, inversions, and fantastic or violent images, often created by the juxtaposition of

incompatible levels of metaphoric and literal language.”<sup>32</sup> Such incongruities then reveal “the potential for human triumph in the inseparability of body and soul, flesh and spirit.”<sup>33</sup> Middleton’s method or rhetoric juxtaposes sacred ritual alongside profane carnality, and then demonstrates that these juxtapositions are triumphantly inseparable, just as their vehicles, body and soul, are inseparable in this life. This rhetoric of conflating corruption and ritual informs much of *Chaste Maid*, which takes place during Lent and culminates in a Church, with a christening at the centre of the play (3.2); but it is also characteristic of exegetical strategies, both Judaic and Christian, with regard to the sensual expression and mystical allegories of Canticles.<sup>34</sup>

The emphasis on joyful silence here, after a dramatically silent courtship, raises important questions about the activity of virtue. As Christina Luckyj has recently argued, silence onstage can be a powerful signifier of “plenitude,” indicating that a character need not speak in order to express herself, or that she may choose not to speak without the necessary implication of erasure: silence itself offers significant rhetorical potential for both women and men, especially on the Renaissance stage. She re-examines the notion of silence to “reveal the ... slippage away from strict denotation into connotation (to not speaking *as a sign* of calm and patience)” and she asks the interesting question: “if discourse is a site of the most insidious, internalised social controls, might silence offer a rival, less highly regulated space?”<sup>35</sup> Luckyj cites Philip McGuire’s term “open silence” to describe non-verbal responses on the stage as “textually indeterminate”—

<sup>32</sup> William Slights, “The Incarnations of Comedy,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 51.1 (Fall 1981), 23.

<sup>33</sup> Slights, 24.

<sup>34</sup> For a brief history and discussion of the connections between rabbinic and early Christian exegesis, see Noam Flinker’s *The Song of Songs in the English Renaissance: Kisses of their Mouths* (Rochester NY: D.S. Brewer, 2000).

<sup>35</sup> Luckyj, ‘*A moving Rhetoricke*’, 3, 5.

“when, in other words, the text itself offers no guidance as to how the silence should be interpreted on the stage.”<sup>36</sup>

Such “open silence” may indeed open interpretive potential for 5.4 of *Chaste Maid*, when Moll and Touchwood Jr. are silent after their vows and are told to go to bed. Luckyj’s questions regarding the problems of assuming the “chaste, silent, and obedient” model of misogynistic rhetoric point out how current criticism privileges the subjectivity of discourse at the expense of “silent” stage presences, which may be “both self-contained, closed, secret *and* open, multiple, uncontrollable, unfathomable.”<sup>37</sup> Like the figure of the Sponsa, who is both enclosed garden as desirable object and opened body as desiring subject, the nominally female rhetoric of silence, chastity, and obedience deliberately elides the conventional boundaries of speech, discourse, and desire. For instance, the Sponsa is *enclosed*, not closed off; the connotation suggests that she is not empty but rather full. Such an enclosed “feminine” self also indicates an important (if only because so often overlooked) agency: the Sponsa, like Moll, may choose to be silent because her physical state is itself expressive; she need not express herself verbally because she is already a signifier of discretion or chastity.<sup>38</sup>

Throughout the entire concluding scene, Moll has one line—“I am silent with delight”—and Touchwood Jr. has two lines—he spurs the Parson to perform the wedding with “Good sir,

<sup>36</sup> Luckyj. 117, note 14; qtg McGuire, *Speechless Dialect: Shakespeare’s Open Silences* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985). Luckyj’s application of “open silence” focuses on Shakespearean tragedy almost exclusively, but the principle is valid for comedy as well.

<sup>37</sup> Luckyj 89; she names Suzanne W. Hull’s *Chaste, Silent and Obedient: English Books for Women 1475-1640* (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1982) as being largely responsible for establishing the cliché.

<sup>38</sup> Again, see Luckyj. 2-4 on silence as plenitude; also, see Luce Irigaray, “The Sex Which is Not One” in *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. R. Warhol and D. Herndl (rpt. “Ce Sexe qui n’en est pas un,” in *Cahier du Grif*, no. 5; English translation by Claudia Reeder, in *New French Feminisms*, New York: 1981; Rutgers UP, 1991), 350-356.

apace” and follows the wedding, like Moll, with “My joy wants utterance.” The wedding vows of 5.4 reflect the literal and figurative openness of “incarnational comedy” in the “silent” responses of Touchwood Jr. and Moll: neither is compelled to be silent, and both merely articulate satisfaction in delighted joy. The ensuing silence of the theatrical kiss then encloses them in this non-verbal interaction: joy and delight characterize a chosen silence, preferred by both new spouses. The joyful silence of both Touchwood Jr. and Moll after their abbreviated vows perpetuates the sense of their agency and the successful achievement of their own goals; they are, after all, the authors of their own “deaths,” which then enable them to “resurrect” in their wedding with the support of the community.

Moll and Touchwood Jr., having engineered such communal support through their necessarily deceptive plot, may now be open with each other as well as with the community. Their silent but significant presence onstage throughout the remainder of the scene directs the alternative and comedic mode of virtuous and pleasurable renewal amidst hypocrisy and corruption. Whether or not they remain faithful, at this concluding moment of the play they offer the emblematic promise of something valuable and worth saving. The “moving rhetoric” of silence on stage suggests that, like obedience in the liturgical form, chastity may have a similarly alternative mode of expression that signals plenitude rather than erasure. In this sense, chastity can be understood as the faithful containment of the individual or of a relationship as a kind of enclosed garden. The figure of the Sponsa incarnates this alternative rhetoric of the body, a “silent” rhetoric that signals virtue as sensually pleasurable: the Sponsa articulates desire through her preferential response to her chosen lover, and the spiritual allegory associated with the Sponsa as a figure of human response to the divine is a powerful rhetoric of emergent virtue.

This is not to deny that the satiric conflation of death and sexual consummation at the end of Middleton’s play comments on the hypocrisy of the marriages in this play, as various critics have

noted in passing references to this scene.<sup>39</sup> Yet the spoken lines that deliberately obscure action from other characters in the play indicate to the audience that something else is also going on alongside the ironic parodies. Despite the abbreviated elaboration of the couple's mutual duties from Middleton's Parson, when he tells them to interline missing articles with kisses, and from Touchwood Sr., who directs the couple to take their winding sheets for wedding sheets, Moll and Touchwood Jr. need not consummate their vows in their coffins onstage any more than bastard children need to be conceived onstage: the presence of coffins is enough to imply that the sexual act is associated with the grave and thus potentially with corruption, sin, fire, and brimstone. But the suggestions from the Parson and Touchwood Sr. also indicate a degree of light-hearted ambiguity that makes the equation of sex with sin too easy, especially since they *rise* from their coffins to be married. The apocalyptic wedding trope is just as present here, offering the possibility of releasing corruption and anxiety through sexual and social concord in marriage.

The urge to identify Middleton's comedic world of marriage as "unpleasant" and governed by "irony" seems to be the effect of focussing on the hypocrisies of the Allwits, Yellowhammers, Kixes, or Sir Walter, rather than on the chaste maid, Moll, who unironically supplies the title for the play. For instance, as Kahn points out, the title, *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, "forms an oxymoron which link[s] entities normally opposed"; Moll's name is "a nickname both for [the Virgin] Mary and for women of the underworld, evoking in a word both virginal and whorish representations of women."<sup>40</sup> After identifying

<sup>39</sup> Dorothy M. Farr, *Thomas Middleton and the Drama of Realism: A Study of Some Representative Plays*, (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1973), 1, 22. For further analyses of marital hypocrisy as Middleton's theme, see Joanne Altieri's "Against Moralizing Jacobean Comedy: Middleton's *Chaste Maid*," *Criticism* 30.2 (Spring 1988), 171-187; Anthony Covatta's *Thomas Middleton's City Comedies* (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1973).

<sup>40</sup> Kahn 253; see also 249. Kahn essentially argues that "the theater wantonly, deliberately confuses categories held elsewhere [in conduct books and sermons] to be clear and firm" after asserting that "The object of this contest [of gender

Moll's potential duality, Kahn interprets both parts in exclusively negative terms, but we cannot forget that Moll is also, as far as we know, a chaste maid who lives in Cheapside. By arguing that desire is a problem that is lodged in women and controlled by marriage, Kahn elides the pleasures of desire that are lodged in the figure of the Virgin/Mother Mary as one of the allegorical identifications of the Sponsa of Christ and that are released by marriage. Thus Moll's "virginal" status in a setting of corruption may also signify a highly versatile idea of womanhood: though initially characterized by her mother as "a dull maid ... drowsy-browed, dull-eyed, drossy-spirited" (1.1.4, 13-14), by the end of the play she is also "silent with delight" (5.4.52) and quick to join her new husband in the sheets (however metaphorically). Moll's chastity need not be a literal virginity for it to be virtuous, any more than her desire needs to be asserted verbally to be clear evidence of her agency: her behaviour clearly demonstrates discretion in her preference for Touchwood Jr. and not for the indiscrete Whorehound.

In her onstage interactions with Touchwood Jr., Moll receives notes and conveys clever responses to indicate that the two are deliberately concealing their plans from others, including, though to a lesser degree perhaps, the audience. Upon Touchwood Jr.'s entrance, for example, he declares (presumably to the audience) his desire for Moll, and then speaks to Moll before addressing her father, who plainly does not hear the exchange:

dominance] is 'the production of a normative 'Woman' within the discursive practices of the ruling elite,' a woman signified by 'the enclosed body, the closed mouth, and the locked house'" (Kahn 249, qtg Peter Stallybrass, "Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed," in *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy J. Vickers [eds.] [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986], 127). Far from being "clear and firm," such representation offers – by Kahn's own estimation – unresolved issues of domestic "responsibility" and "subordination." As I've already established, the "enclosed body" is only half of the Sponsa figure's characterization, and the "closed mouth" that characterizes desire in physical and responsive terms can offer much more than the "obsessively binary conceptualization of sexual categories" that Kahn assumes is characteristic of "theology" (Kahn, 251).

Moll. Sir?

*Touchwood Jr.* Turn not to me 'till thou may'st lawfully, it but whets my stomach, which is too sharp set already. [*Gives her a letter*] Read that note carefully, keep me from suspicion still, nor know my zeal but in thy heart; read and send but thy liking in three words, I'll be at hand to take it.  
(1.1.145-150)

A little later in the same scene, after Moll has apparently had time to read the letter surreptitiously, and while Touchwood Jr. has been commissioning a ring from her unwitting goldsmith father in distinctly bawdy terms that annotate the letter's contents for the audience, the young suitor says to Moll: "Shall I make bold with your finger, gentlewoman?" in order to size it for his otherwise anonymous beloved. She responds, in three words, "Your pleasure, sir" (1.1.194-195).<sup>41</sup> Touchwood Jr. then asks Yellowhammer to engrave the ring with the posy "*Love that's wise, blinds parents' eyes*" (1.1.199); Yellowhammer responds by approving the sentiment: "I wonder things can be so warily carried./ And parents blinded so; but they're served right/ That have two eyes, and wear so dull a sight" (1.1.209-211). Touchwood Jr.'s posy indicates from the beginning of the play that his love is "wise" – that he recognizes the importance of "blinding" or concealing his and Moll's betrothal arrangements while he does not have support from her family. Though we never learn the details of the letter he passes to Moll, her answer – "Your pleasure, sir" – is clearly agreeable, even to the number of words Touchwood Jr. has requested.

That they conduct a relatively silent intrigue through the rest of the play is equally clear when we see them passing notes to each other later, and the evident results of the note-passing in 3.1 when we see the couple about to be married, only to be interrupted by Yellowhammer and Sir Walter. Again, in 4.3, Moll attempts to

<sup>41</sup> The exchange of rings and the holding of hands is also a gestural echo of verbal responses in the wedding form. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the ring had an emblematic significance: "Even in the absence of a priest's blessing (as in betrothal), the ring was sufficient to confer permanence on a relationship" (Gillis, 62).



elope and is caught and beaten by her mother, Maudline.<sup>42</sup> The scene ends with Sir Walter and Touchwood Jr. duelling and wounding each other. Finally, in 5.2, Moll reads another note that seems to inform her of her beloved's death, and faints (to fake her own death). The third, and this time successful, attempt to get married here signifies the couple's determination to fulfil their "pleasure," though we've neither seen nor heard them plotting beyond the implications of the incidents just cited.

It is possible that there have been looks and gestures that have passed between them, but this is not spoken aloud—spoken dialogue indicates only obfuscation or "blinding" of parental opposition.<sup>43</sup> The deliberately ambiguous manner of the lovers' courtship, moreover, literalizes the ideals of marital roles: Touchwood Jr. actually receives a wound, sacrificing his bodily comfort for his marriage; and Moll literally submits herself to silent compliance, being dull or fainting away rather than arguing with her parents' objections, or complaining about them openly to her sympathetic servant Susan.<sup>44</sup> Onstage, silence is another mode of speech, or a "moving rhetoric" indeed; chastity is a mode of discretion, indicating the significance of Moll's preference for Touchwood Jr. instead of Sir Walter Whorehound. Obedience is a

<sup>42</sup> This episode echoes the "dark night of the soul" sequence of *Canticles*, in which the *Sponsa* seeks her beloved in the streets and is beaten by the night watchmen (see *Song* 5:6-8).

<sup>43</sup> Indeed, the audience needn't know that their deaths are faked until they rise from their coffins to be married: winks and nods to the audience aside, it would be more theatrically interesting to imagine that the faked deaths are well faked, and that the audience is not "in" on the details of the lovers' third plot until it is revealed to the rest of the characters. Thus the theatrical audience and the social congregation in the play are potentially conflated, both duped into sympathy and pleasant surprise (and not, as Wigler argues, simply made uncomfortable by voyeuristic self-recognition).

<sup>44</sup> Brunning also notes that Touchwood Jr. "receives a fatal wound from Sir Walter which leads to his 'death' and rebirth" just as "Moll herself undergoes a form of re-baptism in her 'drowning' in the Thames, her subsequent death and final resurrection at the altar" (Brunning 42). However, she does not develop this remark to indicate how the lovers' rebirth is connected to their wedding, instead focussing on Sir Walter as a "Protestant poetic" alternative to Roman and Puritan sacramental rituals of redemption.

way of exerting the authority of social responsibility when both lovers scheme to acquire approbation for their marriage rather than eloping (like the tragic Pyramus and Thisbe, or Romeo and Juliet).

All this while, too, the young couple's lusty determination is contextualized by marital hypocrisy that yet manages to decry itself as hypocrisy, as well as to demonstrate the spirit of due benevolence, mutual affection, and the comedic ideal of support through and beyond adversity. Sir Oliver Kix, for instance, shares a genuine if quarrelsome affection with his wife; the Yellowhammers are united by their morally corrupt materialism; and Touchwood Sr., for all his infidelities, is as genuinely sorry to have to leave his wife for pecuniary reasons, as she is to see him go. Their enforced separation is cast as mutually undesirable:

*Wife.* I shall not want your sight?  
*Touchwood Sr.* I'll see thee often,  
 Talk in mirth, and play at kisses with thee.  
 Anything, wench, but what may beget beggars;  
 There I give o'er the set, throw down the cards,  
 And dare not take them up.  
*Wife.* Your will be mine, sir.

*Exit.*

*Touchwood Sr.* This does not only make her honesty perfect,  
 But her discretion, and approves her judgement.  
 Had her desires been wanton, they'd been blameless  
 In being lawful ever, but of all creatures  
 I hold that wife a most unmatched treasure  
 That can unto her fortunes fix her pleasure  
 And not unto her blood; this is like wedlock;  
 The feast of marriage is not lust but love,  
 And care of the estate.  
 (2.1.38-51)

The lawfulness of the Touchwoods' desire, like Touchwood Jr.'s injunction to Moll to "Turn not to me 'till thou mayst lawfully," shows discrete consideration for a socially directed and supported kind of pleasure. Rather than complaining of punishment for self-indulgence, Touchwood Sr. paraphrases the "due benevolence" rule from 1 Corinthians 7:3-5:

Let the husband render unto the wife due benevolence: and likewise also the wife unto the husband.  
The wife hath not power of her own body, but the husband: and likewise also the husband hath not power of his own body, but the wife.  
Defraud ye not one the other, except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again, that Satan tempt you not for your incontinency.  
(KJV, 1 Corinthians 7:3-5)

Though the Touchwoods, of course, do not confine themselves to “fasting and praying.” Touchwood Sr.’s impregnation of Lady Kix does allow him to reunite with his wife; and they do separate “with consent ... and come together again.” Such mutual “due benevolence” can, as Heather Dubrow suggests, threaten those “readers accustomed to patriarchal authority”:

[T]he rhetoric of the Pauline passages in question and the commentaries on them in the marriage manuals circumscribe and control the very passion ostensibly being unleashed. The language of debt and obligation makes sexuality seem less an anarchic and uncontrollable force and more a mercantile commodity subject to measurement and control ... sexuality is constructed not as a self-indulgent, uncontrollable pleasure but rather as a socially sanctioned and even mandated responsibility.<sup>45</sup>

The responsibility and duty of marriage is both potentially threatening and socially useful, both for men and for women; a socially circumscribed, Lenten-like duty co-exists alongside the carnivalesque sexuality that the Touchwood brothers enjoy with their women.<sup>46</sup> But the pleasures and responsibilities of marriage

<sup>45</sup> Dubrow, *A Happier Eden: The Politics of Marriage in the Stuart Epithalamium*, (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990), 25.

<sup>46</sup> For a refreshing discussion of the Lenten context and the carnivalesque in this play, see Pier Paolo Frassinelli’s “Realism, Desire and Reification: Thomas

also support flexible and various approaches to it; indeed, as Dubrow advocates, “variety and change are among the most salient characteristics of both Tudor and Stuart thinking on marriage; we need to talk in terms of Protestant discourses of marriage, not the Protestant discourse, of Puritan arts of love rather than a unified and monolithic art.”<sup>47</sup> Such a variety of discourses will involve, as in Middleton’s play, both threatening and celebratory notions, both Lenten duty and Carnival liberty, because “marriages are emotionally charged occasions ... [that] represent a threshold between two different states, two different stages in life, and thresholds are perilous” and exciting.<sup>48</sup> The liminal peril that is so joyfully celebrated in the final scene of *A Chaste Maid* emblematically renders the difficulty the lovers have had – their two interrupted attempts to marry – as well as their pleasure in finally marrying because they’ve overcome trouble and hypocrisy to do so, just as the Touchwoods engage in hypocrisy to overcome their problems and re-unite.

### Concluding Remarks

The Renaissance theatre and the English Reformation liturgy both offer their audiences a liminal stage, not only for the exercise of pleasure but also for the social constitution of the whole body. Middleton invites such ecclesiastical and theatrical analogies in his comedy of marriage, itself a liminal stage between innocence and corruption, by alluding to the wedding forms themselves, liturgical customs such as due benevolence and the lawful pleasures of consummation, and the carnivalesque practices of corruption, infidelity, and other pleasurable temptations. That several acts of consummation occur beyond the sanctity of marriage on the edges of this play heightens the irony of the

Middleton’s *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*,” *Early Modern Literary Studies* 8.3 (January 2003).

<sup>47</sup> Dubrow, *Happier Eden*, 1990, 13.

<sup>48</sup> Dubrow, *Happier Eden*, 1990, 5.

parson's emphasis on fidelity and exclusive "kisses" in the final scene; but the various hypocrisies do not undermine "the mutual societie, helpe, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversitie" shared by these unfaithful but happily married couples (*BCP 1559*, 122).

Neither does the context of universal infidelity compromise the possibility that Moll and Touchwood Jr. may be happy together, as Tim and his Welsh "gentlewoman" may also be happy at the conclusion of the final scene:

*Welsh Gentlewoman.* Sir, if your logic cannot prove me honest,  
 There's a thing called marriage, and that makes me honest.  
*Maudline.* Oh, there's a trick beyond your logic, Tim.  
*Tim.* I perceive then a woman may be honest according to the English print, when she is a whore in Latin. So much for marriage and logic! I'll love her for her wit; I'll pick out my runts there; and for my mountains, I'll mount upon  
 (5.4.116-122)

That Tim can choose to love his wife for her wit is the basis for her honesty in "English print." The rhetoric of a wife's "silent" pleasure—her conversation, her obedient responsiveness, and the discretion of chastity—is the basis for her converting or transformative social role in the English Church. That is, her physical virginity is secondary to her willingness to play her role in the community as a domestic and virtuous sovereign. Tim's Welsh Gentlewoman is honest because she has chosen to be his wife, though she has been a whore: marriage is a translation that does not erase its original "text" but builds upon it just as mortal death translates the Christian soul into eternal life without losing the integrity of subjectivity that makes desire possible in the first place.

At the same time, Moll's and her husband's silence mirror the "submission" of everyone that is described in the vow of obedience: obedience requires the observation of duties that Moll and Touchwood Jr. see to with due benevolence indeed, and without much apparent trepidation. The model of speech and

response in the liturgy is a figure for the wife's domestic and social conversation. The husband's infamous role as her "head" is therefore qualified by the head's dependence on the "body" as the site of social interaction; his vow to willingly sacrifice his body and physical comfort for her sake can be read as an acknowledgment of his responsibility to sustain her attentive obedience. The obedience clause, furthermore, applies as well to "we [who] are membres of his body"—to the congregation who witnesses the ceremonial drama before them, "silently" listening and ready, as Touchwood Sr. recommends to his brother, to "utter all at night" or to remain "silent with delight" as Moll expresses herself to be. Moll's and Touchwood Jr.'s silences in the play disclose that such deferral is charged with pleasure rather than compelled by anxiety; Touchwood Jr.'s anticipated utterances are contingent on Moll's continued delight, as signalled by her silence.

Finally, the coffins onstage during the wedding identify the emblematic promise of this wedding with the joyful end of days; though presently imperfect, and with a distinct tendency toward corruption, the promise of worldly marriage prefigures the divine/human wedding. The alternative of Canticles' eroticized rhetoric of the body as a *hortus conclusus* offers a way to see how both the ironized anticipation of carnal allusions, hypocrisies, and infidelities, and the genuine pleasure of ritual satisfaction, interact and co-operate in Middleton's play.

The strange conjunction of coffins and wedding vows is an emblematic echo of liturgical parodies elsewhere in the play, such as the Lenten setting with the corrupt Promoters (2.2) and the christening scene with the drunken and bepossed gossips (3.2). The interpretive traditions of the apocalyptic wedding are embedded in the ceremony of matrimony that is dramatized in Middleton's funeral-cum-wedding scene. *A Chaste Maid's* 5.4 thus offers an emblem of the paradox of corrupted carnality and the recovery of social institutions in the play: the use of coffins as stage properties offers, in Daly's terms, a "concrete visualization of a spiritual and moral experience" as well as a further comment on the dramatic action of the wedding scene and of marriage generally in the rest of

the play. In literalizing the apocalyptic associations of marriage as coffins, Middleton offers a visual and tangible satisfaction for the liturgical/scriptural motifs that he has introduced as corrupted but which may be renewed by this pair of lovers. The stage then offers us the reflected object of ourselves not as absolute or allegorical vices or virtues but rather as agents of vices and virtues. Middleton's comedy explores the petty vices of marriage within the festive rhetoric of scripture, liturgy, and theatrical performance, fully exploiting the ambiguities of such frameworks by staging corruption and perpetual renewal side by side.