

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



‘Were I but a man as others are’: Secrecy and Gender on the Renaissance Stage

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Introduction

In Ben Jonson’s play *Epicoene*, one of the young men of town says ‘That female vice should be a virtue male, / Or masculine vice a female virtue be’ (2.3.115-16).¹ While Daw is speaking about silence and noise, traits which dominate Jonson’s satire, his assessment can be broadened into a range of gendered traits in the Renaissance. What is desired, or at least tolerated, in men, is generally seen as vice or sin in women. Scholars such as Ania Loomba have noted the ties between female sexuality and criminality: ‘female crime is sexual and female sexuality is itself potentially criminal’.² I posit that a further trait of this nature is acting – much like sexuality and unrestrained speech, it is discouraged by some for even men, but is outright dangerous and criminal in women. Acting in women is paradoxically both expected and forbidden: women are natural actors and dissemblers, but for one to do so with intention is truly aberrant.³ So how does the stage, famously self-reflexive, engage with and contain this oxymoron of women’s acting? In this paper, I examine views on female acting through two plays, Ben Jonson’s *Epicoene* (1609-10) and William Heminge’s *The Fatal Contract* (1633-4), which share a twist ending whereby a main character is revealed to even the audience as a person of the opposite

¹ Ben Jonson, *Epicoene, or The Silent Woman*, ed. Roger Holdsworth, New Mermaids (London: Bloomsbury, 2008). All subsequent citations of the play are taken from this edition.

² Ania Loomba, *Gender, Race, and Renaissance Drama* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), p 81.

³ Loomba expands on the stereotype of the changeable, dangerous woman through Cleopatra: ‘the supreme actress – theatrical, unruly and anarchic, whose “infinite variety” also derives from the roles she plays’ (p. 72).

gender.⁴ These secretive disguise plays present a unique view on the morals and possibilities of gendered acting, particularly female acting. In this paper, I argue that female acting is considered uncontrollable and dangerous, a vice akin to other gendered failings, and that the plays respond to this framing by containing its power through conservative approaches to both gender roles and genre expectations.⁵

A brief summary of the two plays will prove useful as a reference, particularly given the obscurity of Heminge's work. In *Epicoene*, the young man Dauphine fools his uncle into marrying a woman who first is surprisingly shrewish, and then is revealed as a boy, invalidating the marriage. Dauphine's goal is to secure his own inheritance, and outside of Dauphine and Epicoene, his partner in crime, none know of the deception. *The Fatal Contract* is a convoluted revenge tragedy in which the revenger Castrato, often referred to simply as 'the Eunuch', is ultimately revealed as Chrotilda, a raped noblewoman. As in the twist of *Epicoene*, Chrotilda's identity is kept a secret from both audience and fellow characters until late in the last act. These two plays illuminate each other as they represent opposite approaches to a similar problem of female acting: *Epicoene* is a comedy in which a boy is disguised as a woman who herself puts on multiple personae; *The Fatal Contract* is a tragedy featuring a woman acting as a male eunuch who ingratiates himself with multiple factions.⁶ Despite the time separating these two plays' authorship, they share some further stylistic features. Both were likely played for private audiences, with *Epicoene* appearing in Whitehouse⁷ and *The Fatal Contract* likely being played at either the Cockpit or Salisbury Court, as Morley hypothesizes.⁸ Thus both

⁴ These two plays were chosen because of their structural similarities, most notably the surprising revelation at the close of the play. Another play frequently included in conversations about gender surprise, *Philaster*, will not be discussed; as Michael Shapiro notes, that play is closer in structure to earlier gender-bending plays, meaning that an experienced audience may well have caught Fletcher's broad hints at *Philaster*'s true identity; see *Gender in Play on the Shakespearean Stage: Boy Heroines and Female Pages* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), p. 45. Along with the surprising revelation at the end, *Epicoene* and *The Fatal Contract* also share an enlightening ambiguity in the main characters' identities, young boys and eunuchs being liminal figures, as well as the plays' genre-bending tendencies. These similarities put the two in naturally close conversation, the effects of which this paper will explore.

⁵ As a secondary goal, this analysis will also suggest a space in the critical discourse for *The Fatal Contract*, which has historically been ignored in part because of the misunderstood cross-dressing woman at the center of the action.

⁶ There is also a parallel between the ambiguously male figures involved in both plays – the boy and the eunuch. This will be addressed below.

⁷ Ben Jonson, *Epicoene, or The Silent Woman*, ed. by Roger Holdsworth, New Mermaids (London: Bloomsbury, 2008), p. xvii.

⁸ Carol A Morley, *The Plays and Poems of William Heminge* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2006), p. 265. Martin Butler, 'Exeunt Fighting: Poets, Players, and Impresarios at the Caroline Hall Theaters', in *Localizing Caroline Drama: Politics and Economics of the Early Modern English Stage*,

would have been played within a milieu of more experimental theater aimed at a somewhat more exclusive audience.⁹ Furthermore, as Butler argues, the Caroline stage was strongly backward-looking, including in plays staged in venues such as that hosting *The Fatal Contract*.¹⁰ This play itself is certainly backward-looking, a new version of the well-trod ground of the revenge tragedy, leading Fredson Bowers to use it as his exemplar of ‘decadent’ revenge.¹¹ Moreover, the play seems to fit McLuskie’s model of an apolitical Caroline tragedy more than Butler’s hypothesis of the playwrights’ deep engagement with their own political scenes.¹² *The Fatal Contract* certainly is considering issues of tyranny and unchecked lust, but does so no more than its generic precursors. Therefore, despite the very different theatrical milieux of the two plays, I believe they can still be fruitfully put into conversation based on their structural similarities.

This paper will begin by reviewing some of the assumptions surrounding gender and performance in the Renaissance. Then, I briefly discuss the ways other critics have read the gendered surprise at the close of *Epicoene*, along with the lacuna of discussion surrounding *The Fatal Contract*. I begin reading the plays with a discussion of how gendered actions both enable and confine the central disguised characters. Though the moment of revelation and its aftermath is a focal point in each play, I discuss ways both plays create internal definitions of female virtue and present perspectives on female acting throughout their texts. I then turn to a discussion of the genres of the texts, which bring their own assumptions about the roles of both gender and acting to bear on both plays. Finally, I will explore the hybridity of both gender and genre the plays engage in to explain both their subversive threats and the attempted containment of those threats.

1625-1642, ed. by Adam Zucker and Alan B. Farmer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 97–128, also places *The Fatal Contract* in Salisbury (p. 120), though this conclusion is at odds with Morley’s argument for an earlier date of production based on topical references.

⁹ It is worth noting that these exclusive audiences were still heterogeneous. As Martin Butler, *Theatre and Crisis, 1632-1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), argues, the Caroline audiences had a wide variety of political leanings and social positions, and the Jacobean audiences were even more diverse (pp. 129-30).

¹⁰ Ibid, pp. 184-5. Kathleen McLuskie, ‘Politics and Aesthetic Pleasure in 1630s Theater’, in *Localizing Caroline Drama: Politics and Economics of the Early Modern English Stage, 1625-1642*, ed. by Adam Zucker and Alan B. Farmer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 43–68, makes a similar claim about the Caroline taste for the familiar (p. 64).

¹¹ Fredson Thayer Bowers, *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy 1587-1642* (Gloucester, Massachusetts: Peter Smith, 1959), p. 236.

¹² McLuskie, p. 52; Butler, *Theatre and Crisis*, pp. 1-2.

Threats and Surprises on the English Stage

Women's morality and the morality of stage-plays are often discussed in the same breath, with misogynistic writings and Puritan anti-theatrical tracts taking similar argumentative approaches and tones towards their targets. This paper takes the broad cultural ideas these texts represent as background, though it will highlight ways they intersect each other on the stage. My approach leads me to be more concerned with the similarities of the misogynistic and anti-theatrical tracts than their differences; in this, I emulate Stephen Orgel's position when he says that, 'It is necessary to remember that antitheatrical tracts are pathological. They share assumptions with the culture as a whole, but their conclusions are eccentric'.¹³

The anti-theatrical tracts tend to harp on the supposed danger of actors' fluid identities and sexual leanings. John Rainolds, for example, argues that acting 'ambitious, cruell, and blasphemous' will imprint on actors, as would traits more appropriate to the opposite sex.¹⁴ This dangerous fluidity allies actors with women, 'the inherently theatrical and duplicitous sex with temperaments prone to change and inconstancy'.¹⁵ Broadly, women were considered chameleon-like actors by nature, liable of slipping easily from deception to deception. Where women differ from professional actors is exactly that 'inconstancy' – professional actors were subversive because their acting had a defined scope; women, however, were naturally unpredictable in their acting, and any role could collapse at any time. Male actors can cast off their disguise with volition, highlighting the lie of the costume. Pamphleteer Stephen Gosson is particularly concerned with the actor's ability to lie fluently, citing it as sin: 'in Stage Playes for a boy to put on the attire, the gesture, the passions of a woman... is by outward signes to shewe themselves otherwise then they are, and so with in the compasse of a lye'.¹⁶ Throughout the play, however, an actor's

¹³ Stephen Orgel, *Spectacular Performances: Essays on Theatre, Imagery, Books and Selves in Early Modern England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), p.35.

¹⁴ John Rainolds, *Th'[H]Overthrow of Stage-Playes, by the Way of Controversie Betwixt D. Gager and D. Rainoldes Wherein All the Reasons That Can Be Made for Them Are Notably Refuted; Th'objections Aunswered, and the Case so Cleared and Resolved, as That the Iudgement of Any Man, That Is Not Froward and Perverse, May Easely Be Satisfied. Wherein Is Manifestly Proved, That It Is Not Onely Vnlawfull to Bee an Actor, but a Beholder of Those Vanities. Wherevnto Are Added Also and Annexed in Th'end Certaine Latine Letters Betwixt the Sayed Maister Rainoldes, and D. Gentiles, Reader of the Civill Law in Oxford, Concerning the Same Matter* (Middelburg: Printed by Richard Schilders, 1599), Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, STC / 349:16 <http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&res_id=xri:eebo&rft_id=xri:eebo:citation:99850787>, pp. 19, 17.

¹⁵ Jean Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England* (London: Routledge, 1994).

¹⁶ Stephen Gosson, *Playes Confuted in Fiue Actions* (London: Thomas Gosson, 1582), *Early English Books Online*, STC/ 384:21 <http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-

disguise is impenetrable; unless otherwise written by the playwright, the actor's physicality would fade while his character's dominated. While women were as liable as any actor to take up a role, those roles lacked the control exerted by her male counterpoint. As Joseph Swetnam argues in his vicious attack on women, 'she will be now merry, then again sad; now laugh, then weep; now sicke, then presently whole'.¹⁷ Women are presented as a paradox: natural actors, yet unpredictable in their acting. In William Slights's formulation, 'Women not only have secrets, they are often conceived of as actually being secrets. But they are also thought to be "leaky vessels that cannot long contain secrets"'.¹⁸ Women are assumed to be in a state of constant dissembling that could not be maintained, whereas men could be expected to uphold their façades, no matter how subversive. Whether one loves or loathes the theater, the actor's controlled chameleon ability is at the heart of that response; yet such an ability has no place outside of the theater, particularly in female form. As Phyllis Rackin explains,

Some [Renaissance writers] praised the actors for their protean ability to assume disparate shapes, while others condemned them as hypocrites who belied the natures and roles that God had seen fit to give them, but admirers and detractors alike understood that the player was a dangerous anomaly in a hierarchical society.¹⁹

I build on this discussion by interrogating how the stage negotiates female acting – actors may have license from some to enact such a 'dangerous anomaly' for specific moments of time, but the people, and particularly the women, they portray do not have such license within their fictional worlds, let alone in the wider scope of reality.

When a stage actor takes his ability to deceive the audience too far, he risks alienating those spectators even if they have no moral objections to acting.²⁰ I am less interested in the shock of discovery itself than in how that shock adds another dimension to the matrix

2003&res_id=xri:eebo&rft_id=xri:eebo:citation:99841483>, E4r. Howard notes that arguments such as Gosson's were necessary specifically because of the power plays held over their audiences (p. 5).

¹⁷ Joseph Swetnam, *The Araignment of Levvd, Idle, Froward, and Vnconstant Women* (London: Printed [by Thomas Snodham] for Thomas Archer, 1616), Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, STC / 1366:01 <http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-

2003&res_id=xri:eebo&rft_id=xri:eebo:image:11672>, p. 11.

¹⁸ William Slights, *Ben Jonson and the Art of Secrecy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), p. 18.

¹⁹ Phyllis Rackin, 'Androgyny, Mimesis, and the Marriage of the Boy Heroine on the Renaissance Stage', *PMLA*, 102.1 (1987), 29-41 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/462490>>, (p. 35).

²⁰ Kathleen McLuskie, in 'Politics and Aesthetic Pleasure', notes that this consideration would be particularly strong in the Caroline era; a strengthened focus on producing a 'repeatable repertory' meant that playwrights and companies would be even more concerned with avoiding the censor (p. 64).

of gender, genre, and performance I am interrogating. In the case of *Epicoene*, the moment of revelation is a major question as critics determine how such a move could avoid alienating an audience.²¹ For example, J.A. Jackson proposes that audiences who can approach the play critically and judge the social structures leading to Morose's shame will avoid shaming themselves.²² Such a discerning audience may well have been a reasonable hope, if not expectation; McLuskie argues for a growing emphasis on theatrical taste in the Caroline period, and Nova Myhill argues that Ben Jonson actively wrote for an audience that concerned itself with theatrical judgment.²³ Both Reuben Sanchez and Simone Chess note the palliative potential of the title, allowing the more learned audience members to anticipate the gag because of the ambiguous grammatical gender of 'epicoene'.²⁴ C.A. Carpenter offers perhaps the most widely-applicable solution: some of the audience members would be repeat attendees. These people would enjoy superior knowledge over their peers, enhancing the comic experience.²⁵ In each of these theories, critics point to specific moments in the play or elements of playwrighting and playgoing which enable communication of the trick to a subset of the audience, diminishing its subversive shock value.

In contrast to *Epicoene* and its rich critical history, there is a dearth of discussion surrounding *The Fatal Contract*, perhaps because of the scathing treatment to which Fredson Thayer Bowers subjects the play in his *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy*.²⁶ Bowers concludes his description of the plot by saying,

²¹ Throughout this paper, I follow Allison P. Hobgood, *Passionate Playgoing in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), in her approach to audience as multivalent, both referring potentially to the singular person and to the collective response. While her humoral approach necessitates a distinction between those options, most of my hypotheses can apply to either the individual or the collective.

²² J.A. Jackson, "“On Forfeit of Your Selves, Think Nothing True”: Ben Jonson's Use of Deception in *Epicoene*", *EMLS*, 10.1 (2004) <<http://extra.shu.ac.uk/emls/10-1/jackjons.htm>> [accessed 28 April 2018], 7.

²³ Kathleen McLuskie, 'Politics and Aesthetic Pleasure', pp. 48-9; Nova Myhill, 'Taking the Stage: Spectators as Spectacle in the Caroline Private Theaters', in *Imagining the Audience in Early Modern Drama, 1558-1642*, ed. by Nova Myhill and Jennifer Low (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 37-54 (p. 38).

²⁴ Reuben Sanchez, "“Things like Truths, Well Feigned”: Mimesis and Secrecy in Jonson's *Epicoene*", *Comparative Drama*, 2006, 313-36 (p. 318); Simone Chess, *Male-to-Female Crossdressing in Early Modern English Literature: Gender, Performance, and Queer Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 82.

²⁵ Charles A. Carpenter, 'Epicoene Minus Its Secret: Surprise as Expectation' *Xavier University Studies* 7.3 (1968), 15-22.

²⁶ Bowers, *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy 1587-1642*. Exceptions to this generalization include an article predating Bowers which traces Heminge's borrowings from Shakespeare, Carol Morley's edited volume

Finally, Chrotilda, as evil and villainous a revenger as ever trod the stage, is considered a noble heroine. By her very disguise as a Moor she would alienate the audience from Castrato at the start, and this detestation would be increased at every fresh villainy... Yet with the revelation of her sex and her true identity, and with her refusal to kill Clotaire, the audience is expected to turn about face, and, forgetting her whole past, to accept her as a heroine worthy of pity.²⁷

Bowers feels that because Chrotilda's identity is withheld until the play demands an affective reversal, the work is irredeemably confusing and grotesque. To him, the bonds formed with a character cannot be reevaluated when the assumptions on which they were built are violated so severely and abruptly. However, Bowers's anger and sense of betrayal at the close of the play is not only due to the trick he apparently failed to anticipate, or because of the disconnect between the character he knew and her revealed identity. Instead, that betrayal is specifically gendered and racialized. The character and her persona are irreconcilable because every aspect of the two identities is antithetical: victim and villain, white and black, female and male, internally wounded and externally mutilated. Since Bowers's treatment, the play has had little reevaluation by critics who, in a more modern milieu, might look more kindly on the existence of such a trick as they do in *Epicoene*. In light of this absence, it is notable that the arguments for *Epicoene*'s satirical success map well onto *The Fatal Contract*.²⁸ While historically, the trick of *The Fatal Contract*, along with its (admittedly many) stylistic flaws, have led to the play being critically ignored, the leeway given to *Epicoene* for similar structural devices suggests that Heminge's play may merit more attention, and contribute to the same conversation about gendered performance.

When evaluating the dramatic reveal, prior critics have mainly focused on the technical aspects of playgoing – audience demeanor, repeat viewings – as well as verbal trickery

of Heminge's poems and plays, a brief discussion of Castrato's blackness in Peter Hyland's book about stage disguise, and my own work. Joseph Quincy Adams Jr., 'William Heminge and Shakespeare', *Modern Philology*, 12.1 (1914), 51–64 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/433013>>; Carol A Morley, *The Plays and Poems of William Heminge* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2006); Peter Hyland, *Disguise on the Early Modern Stage* (London: Routledge, 2013); Samantha Dressel, "'Like to my soft sex': Female Revenge and Violence in *The Fatal Contract*", *Quidditas*, 37 (2016), 7-24. All quotations from *The Fatal Contract* are drawn from Morley's edition. Since this paper was written, a new edition of *The Fatal Contract* edited by Andrea Stevens has been included in *The Routledge Anthology of Early Modern Drama*, ed. Jeremy Lopez (London: Routledge, 2020).

²⁷ Bowers, pp. 241-2.

²⁸ Even the double-entendre of the main character's name might be replicated; Morley notes that Chrotilda's name holds allusional relevance which likely would have been known to Heminge's audience (pp. 274-5).

and hints. However, they largely ignore a major structural element shared by the two characters in question: each functions as an in-play actor, enacting the opposite gender. I highlight this metatheatrical focus because it imparts a difficult and vital valence to the pattern of secrecy and discovery that makes the plays both appealing and problematic. Both plays engage in an ambivalent view of gender norms and a strange mix of generic expectations; in this, the structure and morality of the plays mirror their protagonists, which in both disguise and revelation seem to evade definitive classification.

Constructing and Defying Gender Standards

Different expectations for the genders, especially in terms of their acting abilities, are central to *Epicoene*.²⁹ Numerous critics have explored this idea in terms of the clearly-delineated men and women of the play; I will extend this conversation to the character of Epicoene, positing that his acting in itself is a comment on gendered action whether he is enacting male or female traits.³⁰ Daw's song, an excerpt of which I used to begin this paper, sharply delineates expectations for the genders, and throughout the play those expectations are reinforced while also systematically revealed as absurd and extreme. Daw's language, 'That female vice should be a virtue male / Or masculine vice a female virtue be', embodies the absurdity of the absolute, and *Epicoene*'s characters are pilloried both for enacting and breaking this dichotomy.

When Epicoene first appears on stage, she seems to refute the stereotype of women as leaky vessels, acting at the height of female (silent) virtue.³¹ As the 'Silent Woman', she

²⁹ For example, Rebecca Merrens, asserts that, 'These plays – so fundamentally concerned with gender hierarchies and modalities – are less significant for the gender identities they present than for the spectacle they stage of creating and contesting what maleness and femaleness mean'; see "'Ignoring the Men": Female Speech and Male Anxiety in Margaret Cavendish's *The Female Academy* and Jonson's *Epicoene*', *In-between: Essays and Studies in Literary Criticism*, 9.1–2 (2000), 243–60 (p. 259).

³⁰ Mario DiGangi, 'Gender and Sexuality', in *Ben Jonson in Context*, ed. by Julie Sanders (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 339–47 (p. 346), notes that the play responds to 'the insistent desires of 'every sex and age''. In doing so, it presents characters with indeterminately-gendered traits, whose theatricality is discussed by Sanchez, Jackson, Merrens, and Dunnum. Eric Dunnum, 'Dauphine Was Right: Masques, the Authenticity of (Un)Performed Identity, and the Two Prologues of *Epicoene*', *The Ben Jonson Journal*, 22.2, 229–51 <<https://doi.org/10.3366/bjj.2015.0136>> explores the complex relationship between identity and performance throughout *Epicoene*; however, his excellent argument is largely silent on the one performance sustained throughout the play: that of Epicoene himself.

³¹ As much as possible, I use the pronouns by which characters identify themselves – thus, I refer to Epicoene in female guise as 'she', and the eunuch disguise of Castrato as 'he'. When discussing these characters in the abstract, I refer to the character's sex: a male Epicoene and female Chrotilda.

gives nothing away verbally. Morose is shocked to find a complement to his own extreme verbosity, one who does not take ‘Pleasure in your tongue, which is a woman’s chiefest pleasure’ (2.5.40). The contrast between the silent woman and the longwinded man highlights the contradiction implicit in the discourse surrounding female speech; as Patricia Parker notes, loquacity is allied with the feminine, and yet across a host of plays, it is male characters who find the most space for speech, often expounding at length to further the plot or engage in self-contemplation.³² Morose fulfills this expectation to an exaggerated degree, and subsequently finds silence in another person, particularly a woman, unthinkable. He attempts to seduce Epicoene into revealing what he believes must be her true vociferous nature ‘With the utmost touch and test of their sex’ – asking about her clothing preferences (2.5. 66). When she resists even this temptation, Morose judges her through the lens of additional gendered stereotypes. In his circumscribed worldview, no woman could be such a skilled actress to resist revealing her mutability at the promise of clothing. Therefore, her state must be as she presents it: she must truly be a near-mute. A leaky woman could not possibly adeptly pass so many temptations to speak, so Morose accepts that her actions truly represent her interiority.

Negative gender stereotypes, however, appear to win out: a woman may act flawlessly for a time, but eventually her tempestuous nature will reveal itself through her tongue. Once Epicoene and Morose are married, Epicoene metamorphoses into a voluble scold, sister to the loud and mannish Collegiates who are known to, ‘cry down or up what they like or dislike... with most masculine or rather hermaphroditical authority’ (1.1.75-7).³³ Immediately upon speaking her marriage vows, Epicoene demands her voice: ‘Why, did you think you had married a statue? or a motion only? one of those French puppets with the eyes turned with a wire?’ (3.4.34-6). Given Jonson’s penchant for trickery, even a naïve audience may have anticipated and enjoyed this comic moment. Morose too is largely unsurprised; though he is personally shocked by the betrayal, his system of understanding the world is reinforced. Upon this revelation he calls his wife ‘a manifest woman!’ (3.4.39). As Chess observes,

though Epicoene’s behavior might be seen as a sign of masculinity, Morose, for one, sees it as a sign of Epicoene’s deeply feminine nature. He... begins a lengthy

³² Patricia Parker, ‘On the Tongue: Cross Gendering, Effeminacy, and the Art of Words’, *Style*, 23.3 (1989), 445–65, < <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42945808>> (p. 453).

³³ Merrens insightfully notes that the portrayal of the Collegiates is not necessarily negative: because there is no clear moral alternative to the dissolute members of either gender, ‘Jonson is not merely lampooning female speech but flaying open attitudes towards it’ (257).

process of applying for divorce, not because his wife is a boy, but because the boy is such a convincing and intolerable woman.³⁴

Rather than suggesting Epicoene's secret gender, her verbal outbursts reinforce her performed gender, while simultaneously suggesting that she is a woman of uncommon acting skill, given her earlier façade of silence.

The revelation of Epicoene as 'a manifest woman' subverts Morose's own identity as a man (3.4.39). Morose defines himself by his verbosity – his control over every situation was comically signaled by his hatred of noise, silencing all other parties while giving him the space to expound at length. Morose's extreme speech leans into Daw's version of gender roles, separating male and female in binary opposition while simultaneously subverting stereotypes towards vocal excess by staging primarily male verbosity. Epicoene then upends the play's own binary construction by claiming the authority to speak in Morose's presence. She participates in supposedly-female vice directly through her speech, and indirectly through the revelation of her excellent acting. She speaks above Morose's constant and theoretically-virtuous (according to Daw) speechifying, displacing his dialogically-constructed identity.³⁵ Truewit, another of the young men in Dauphine's coterie, expands on the supposition that Epicoene is seizing male authority, describing the power of her language as supernatural: 'Her masculine and loud commanding and urging the whole family, makes him think he has married a Fury' (4.1.8-10).³⁶ With this masculine and powerful force overtaking his household with a vengeance Morose is subsequently diminished and feminized.³⁷ Attempting to escape his marriage, Morose declares that, 'I am no man, ladies' – that he is impotent, and therefore fulfills one of the legal categories for divorce (5.4.41). The language Jonson uses here is notable, as Morose

³⁴ Chess, p. 83.

³⁵ Mario DiGangi, 'Asses and Wits: The Homoerotics of Mastery in Satiric Comedy', *English Literary Renaissance*, 25.2 (1995), 179–208 (p. 185), might refer to this moment as 'sodomitical', at least for a knowledgeable audience, in that the accepted social order is being overthrown, and a man who should be the master is subordinated in his own house by another man. Even without the additional valence of society-disrupting sodomy between men, the disruption of Morose's control by a woman is radical and dangerous.

³⁶ Ironically, Truewit uses the female metaphor of a Fury to explain Epicoene's masculine subversions, creating even deeper gender confusion.

³⁷ As DiGangi, in 'Gender and Sexuality', notes, traits being taken up by the opposing gender is not problematic in itself: 'since for women to achieve "manliness" in the sense of discipline and moral virtue (but not aggression or license) is commendable... Conversely moralists and theologians admonished men as well as women to be chaste and to speak modestly and behave submissively towards social superiors' (p. 340). However, at this moment in the play, such commendable androgyny is clearly not activated – instead, Morose and Epicoene are both partaking of qualities that truly are vice in the opposite gender, such as weakness and belligerence respectively.

proclaims that his gender is entirely mislabeled before explaining his intended meaning of being, 'Utterly unabled in nature' (5.4. 43).

With both Epicoene's and Morose's gender identities turned on their heads, one might think that the comic trickery of *Epicoene* is played out. Jonson has one more trick, however, and once again turns the tables on both the unmanned Morose and the audience. In the final scene, Dauphine reveals that his uncle the no-man has in turn married no woman: 'You have married a boy, a gentleman's son' (5.4.189). This revelation is shocking, but also explains Epicoene's acting prowess. Epicoene plays his roles of silent woman and voluble scold faultlessly. Sanchez posits that this dexterity is an extension of Epicoene's gender-indeterminate station: 'As the epicene partakes of the characteristics of both sexes, Epicene possesses the knowledge of the nonactor Dauphine as well as the ability to communicate of the overactor Truewit'.³⁸ However, given contemporary beliefs about the superior acting control of men, I argue that this moment is more fruitfully read as proof of Epicoene's ultimate masculinity rather than his epicene mutability. Only a man could dissemble so well, in such a controlled fashion. While Epicoene indeed partakes in the knowledge of both genders and in the acting styles of other characters as Sanchez argues, his reactions to that knowledge are wholly male. Furthermore, as Dutton and McLuskie both note, Epicoene's female identity is a constant projection of both positive and negative male fantasy.³⁹ As a boy, Epicoene has direct access to male desire and nightmare, making him a far more knowledgeable actor to depict those fantasies than a woman could possibly be. Epicoene can understand and imitate the beliefs of the men around him and he enacts those beliefs with the consistent and controlled skill only available to men.

This endpoint conforms to the gendered expectations of acting and subsequently deflates the subversive potential Epicoene threatens to embody. Recalling Daw's assessment of masculine and feminine virtues as polarities, Epicoene is a male performing a male-coded action well, rather than a woman performing the same male action in a terrifyingly-competent way.⁴⁰ The acting that Dauphine enabled would be monstrous in a woman, and so it appeared to be when a supposedly-female Epicoene impersonated maidenly silence rather than living it. Merrens notes this paradox of desiring a silent woman, yet hating she

³⁸ Sanchez, 333.

³⁹ Ben Jonson, *Epicoene*, ed. by Richard Dutton, Revels (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 89; Kathleen McLuskie, *Renaissance Dramatists* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1989), pp. 168-9.

⁴⁰ Metatheatrically, Epicoene's excellent acting is logical – Epicoene is a boy, acting as well as the boy is who plays him. This metatheatrical realism aligns with Rackin's argument that in Jonson's work, art imitates life, including and especially on the level of gender (33).

who can act well enough to fulfill that fantasy: ‘What Jonson makes clear through these male characters is that men paradoxically desire silent and controllable women, but not... the dissembling that such performance requires’.⁴¹ Such a performance is subversive if female, as it presents a woman who can transcend the chaotic acting natural to her sex. However, with Epicoene revealed as a boy, this terrifying acting can be reinterpreted as droll trickery.⁴² Richmond Barbour highlights the important nuance that the revelation of a boy specifically, rather than a man, further diffuses the anxieties of gender indeterminacy:

this question would have been a matter of manifest anxiety if the play had not been performed by children, who represented indeterminacy in its least threatening form. By their presence, the boys suspended the audience’s defensiveness against the gender confusion they perform.⁴³

Epicoene’s true male, and moreover boyish, identity mediates his seeming subversion, and the audience can reinterpret the play through the truism of excellent male acting once they have processed Jonson’s trick.

The Fatal Contract also presents a definition of gendered acting, though it does so by implicitly comparing two different modes of female performance. Heminge juxtaposes Chrotilde, a terrifying but morally justified actress, with the evil queen Fredigond who exhibits mutable female acting tied to other moral wrongs. I will consider Fredigond first, as she presents the audience’s initial impression of acting and a framework by which subversive female action can be judged, much as Daw’s song does in *Epicoene*. The queen presents one terrifying extreme, reinforcing the worst stereotypes of female lust and violence along with her changeable façades. These darker implications of female dissembling are hinted at in *Epicoene* with Epicoene’s violent verbal outburst after marriage, and when Daw and LaFoole both claim to have slept with her. Where Epicoene’s disguise toes the line of these linked female evils of sexuality, criminality, and acting, Fredigond embodies them, orchestrating the death of one son at the hand of the other, and ultimately working toward the deaths of both in order to elevate her lover as king. Fredigond is criminal in her murderous machinations, and particularly monstrous

⁴¹ Merrens, 258.

⁴² Rackin similarly posits, ‘In *Epicoene*, Jonson attempts to deal with the dangers of social and sexual transgression by upholding the socially sanctioned gender divisions and by resolving his play in the abolition of sexual ambiguity: the transvestite figure is finally revealed as the boy the actor who played him really was’ (36).

⁴³ Richmond Barbour, “‘When I Acted Young Antinous’: Boy Actors and the Erotics of Jonsonian Theater”, *PMLA*, 110.5 (1995), 1006–22 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/463026>> (p. 1015).

in that criminality because her crimes place lust ahead of her appropriate roles as mother and wife. These female roles are stereotypically good, and her crimes invert them into opposing stereotypes of female evil; the ways Fredigond acts out are paradoxically gendered in the same ways as the very roles she resists.

Heminge makes the links among Fredigond's sexuality, criminality, and acting explicit through his characters' discussions. This further reinforces the sense that Fredigond's sinister female mutability which enables her performance of evil, is innate: multiple characters assume this link as well. The Eunuch (Chrotilda in disguise) recognizes these linked traits and frames the audience's response to the queen with an aside that describes Fredigond's machinations and feigned emotions as, 'Pretty woman-villainy and dissimulation' (2.2.221). 'Woman-villainy' appears to be an established category of criminality in Castrato's mind, and is tied thematically and grammatically to dissembling. Fredigond does not contradict Castrato's label; in fact, she reinforces it when speaking to her lover Landrey. She herself admits that she was only impersonating a role that should instead be integral to her identity:

How did I play the mother;
Did I not seem a *Niobe* in passion,
A deluge of salt tears? (2.2.239-41).

She 'play[s]' the mother rather than living that role, only emulating the (positively-connoted) archetype of female grief through artifice, and she drops her act immediately once she and her lover are alone. When Landrey assures her that, 'Most true, you wept', she struts: 'As a good Actor in a play would do' (2.2.241-2). Fredigond's direct comparison of herself to an actor counterintuitively highlights the difference between them – in a woman, acting is considered a vice, whereas in men, if it is not good, at least it is allowable if contentious in certain circumstances. This disconnect is further heightened by the context of Fredigond's unnatural goals. Fredigond resembles an actor in one terrifying way though; she maintains her disguise for just as long as she needs it. Professional actors faced criticism similar to that which a playgoing audience might have against Fredigond for just this reason – for example, Gosson's contention that acting in any context is intrinsically dishonest: 'Outward signes conflict eyther in words or gestures, to declare our selves by wordes or by gestures to be otherwise then we are, is an act executed where it should not, therefore a lye'.⁴⁴ Heminge plays with this assumption of actorly immorality in *The Fatal Contract*, with Fredigond constantly pursuing the persuasive lie in order to enact evil.

⁴⁴ Gosson, E4r.

Not only does Fredigond tie her acting to her criminal intentions, she also links it to sexual deviance explicitly. She mutates the meaning of ‘act’ following her self-identification as actorly, saying, ‘Come, shall we Act *Landrey*’ (2.2.249). As though her sexual pun were not already explicit enough, she reinforces it in short order: ‘Come then my joy to bed, where we will Act’ (2.2.254). Fredigond can be an excellent actress when it suits her, counterfeiting emotion and expertly manipulating those around her under false pretenses for her own pleasure and gain. However, like coitus itself, her plots are short-lived. Once she returns to a private space with her co-conspirators Landrey and Castrato, the disguises dissolve immediately. Furthermore, the nature of those co-conspirators reinforces the sexualized goals of her acting. Along with Landrey’s role as royal consort, the Eunuch’s very presence evokes unchecked sexuality. Judy Hayden notes that the world of the seraglio ‘simultaneously suggest[s] the ubiquitous lure and unremitting danger of unchecked female desire’.⁴⁵ The play is set in France, but the Eunuch’s presence implicitly brings the Eastern seraglio into the West, contributing to the perceived perversity of Fredigond’s voracious and socially-condemned sexuality. Fredigond’s plots, speeches, and very situation present her as the archetypal evil actress. She combines a protean persona, unchecked sexual lust, and perverse criminal bloodlust, a sinister and threatening parallel to Epicoene’s representation of masculine anxiety.

Chrotilda is a strong counterexample to Fredigond’s sinister model of female acting, yet her own presentation is ambivalent, in part because of the richly-charged persona she assumes. Her persona of the Eunuch remains intact throughout the play, the body beneath the costume hidden from both characters and audience, even through multiple soliloquies. The Eunuch’s apparently-unmotivated evil presents the ultimate secrecy, at odds with the assumptions surrounding a woman’s leaky body and mind. The Eunuch goes to great lengths to gain Fredigond’s trust, even expressing the desire to rape the supposedly-missing Chrotilda: ‘Oh were I but a man as others are / ... With Organs apt and fit for woman’s service’, the Eunuch would search ‘Till I had met Chrotilda, whom by force / I’d make to mingle with these sootie limbs’ (1.2. 53-9). Even without taking the reality of the disguise into account,⁴⁶ these lines represent a complex intersection of racial and

⁴⁵ Judy A. Hayden, ““Turkish Dames” and “English Mastiffs”: The “Turk” and the Female Body in Massinger’s *The Renegado*”, *The Seventeenth Century*, 28.4 (2013), 349–61 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/0268117x.2013.836459>> (p. 355).

⁴⁶ Morwenna Carr thoughtfully analyzes these lines in terms of the reality of costuming, arguing that ‘Chrotilda’s arms have been completely mingled with the Eunuch’s ‘sootie’ ones; she has marked her body with his imagined body’. Morwenna Carr, ‘Material / Blackness: Race and its Material Reconstructions on the Seventeenth-Century English Stage’, *Early Theatre*, 20.1 (2017), 77–96 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.12745/et.20.1.2848>> (p. 89).

sexual prejudices against the voracious East; as Daniel Vitkus argues, ‘The Turks are both immoderate and disciplined, excessively masculine and perversely unmasculine... Libidinal excess is counterbalanced by castration and the seclusion of women’.⁴⁷ The Eunuch seems to embody both of these opposing stereotypes, simultaneously immoderately lustful and unable to act on that lust because of the castration which refigures him as less of a man. A eunuch’s strange position between sexualized subject and unnaturally-stunted object is not unique to the Turk plays Vitkus discusses, though Chrotilda’s use of blackface evokes that paradigm. In the discourse surrounding castrati in Europe, Katherine Crawford similarly argues that there is a ‘conflation of presumptions that castrates were non-desiring asexuals and hypersexual (either themselves or inspiring desire in others)’.⁴⁸ While Chrotilda has no link to the musical provenance of castrati, her assumed name of Castrato insures that neither the European nor Eastern eunuch is forgotten, especially through the conflation in both cases of their extreme sexuality and stunted potential. In addition to Eastern and Western eunuchs, the Classical stage trope of the eunuch is also evoked. As Keir Elam establishes, characters in traditional Greek comedies and their ideological descendants use a eunuch disguise to hide their extreme virility and penetrate female spaces.⁴⁹ This trope does not fit *The Fatal Contract* particularly well, but Fredigond’s overt sexuality could certainly invite speculation about the Eunuch’s easy presence in her personal chambers. In short, Chrotilda’s choice to disguise herself as a eunuch is significant because, as her impotent threat of rape highlights, her costume is an ambivalent one.⁵⁰ As Epicoene does, the Eunuch partakes of both genders while refuting stereotypes placed on each. His speech and actions promise violence against women (a promise he fulfills later in the play), but the very notion of the Eunuch’s presence as a castrate threatens masculinity as well.

An audience who had already experienced the play would hear the Eunuch’s threats towards Chrotilda ironically, in a way not accessible to a naïve audience. Slights notes

⁴⁷ Daniel Vitkus, *Turning Turk: English Theater and the Multicultural Mediterranean, 1570-1630* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 119.

⁴⁸ Katherine Crawford, ‘Desiring Castrates, or How to Create Disabled Social Subjects’, *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, 16.2 (2016), 59-90 <<https://doi.org/10.1353/jem.2016.0011>> (p. 64).

⁴⁹ Keir Elam, ‘The Fertile Eunuch: Twelfth Night, Early Modern Intercourse, and the Fruits of Castration’, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 47.1 (1996), 1–36 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/2871057>> (p. 28).

⁵⁰ In addition to the Orientalism invoked by the figure of the Eunuch, the Castrato disguise also engages with the stereotypical “‘monstrous” favorite” identified by DiGangi. He notes that this stock Caroline character is defined by ‘grotesquely excessive influence, treachery, and violence’ – traits that fit Castrato well and are further exaggerated by the inherent monstrosity of the eunuch’s existence. Mario DiGangi, ‘A Beast So Blurred: The Monstrous Favorite in Caroline Drama’, in *Localizing Caroline Drama: Politics and Economics of the Early Modern English Stage, 1625-1642*, ed. by Adam Zucker and Alan B. Farmer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 157–81 (p. 159).

the preponderance of similar moments in *Epicoene* where, ‘Paradoxically, the same text is used for the purpose of self-revelation as for self-concealment. Every gesture of self-display is accompanied by a corresponding act of self-disguise that withholds the most precious self from public scrutiny’.⁵¹ For those who know to look for it, Chrotilda’s lines of threat are explicit self-display as she highlights the difference between herself and ‘a man as others are’ (1.2.53). For an ignorant audience, and her intended audience of Fredigond, however, these lines serve as self-disguise, reinforcing the Orientalized identities of an evil voracious male and a castrate. Chrotilda threatens an act (of sex) in order to reinforce her own act (of disguise and revenge), prefiguring Fredigond’s punning on her own bedroom acts. In acting the voracious and violent Turk, Chrotilda performs herself as an object of female fear and anxiety, much as Epicoene performs himself as the epitome of male nightmare. Notably, however, even for an audience who does not recognize another consciousness beneath the costume, these lines ring false, an act in themselves. Throughout the rest of the play, the Eunuch acts asexually, including a stark rejection of Fredigond’s wandering affections. It would likely be apparent even for naïve audiences that this speech functions to gain the queen’s trust – another of the Eunuch’s performances.

For the majority of the play, Chrotilda’s disguise is impenetrable; eventually, however, her feminine nature must out and reveal itself despite her vitally-important goals. Through the first four acts of the play, the Eunuch’s soliloquies disguise his true gender from the audience as well as from Fredigond. If anything, they are more persuasive of his masculine identity, lacking the rich double-speak of his above conversation with Fredigond. In the Eunuch’s many asides and soliloquies, he presents himself as a simple Vice character, never hinting at a disguised identity despite the intimacy with the audience bred by such moments. Rather than explaining the true motivation of his revenge after outlining his plot to the audience, he simply says, ‘The more it works their woe, the more’s my delight’ (2.2.264). Only when the Eunuch approaches the culmination of her plot does her façade begin to crack. When her rapist Clotair finally confesses his guilt, Chrotilda feels remorse for her violence and needs to strengthen her resolve in order to kill him and complete her revenge. She finally admits in an aside,

I was never liker t’express my selfe
Than at this minute; do not betray me tears,
The Eunuchs nature must be harsh and cruel (5.2.350-2).

⁵¹ Slights, 29.

This is the first clear suggestion in the play that the Eunuch has another ‘selfe’ to express. At this late point in the text, the female Chrotilda’s disguise is finally slipping: her femininity is overpowering her costume. This failure is paradoxically comforting: as Laura Levine establishes, the antitheatrical tracts often expressed the fear that identity can be overwritten through acting, that ‘everyone can be converted into someone else’.⁵² Chrotilda’s emergent identity works to soothe that anxiety – the immaculate actress who has perfectly hidden her identity for nearly five full acts still has feminine tears against which she must fight. Of course, while her tears are socially comforting, they also threaten to disrupt her revenge. The leaky vessel of Chrotilda’s emotion must be shored up, lest her (im)proper feminine feelings leak out as tears and prevent her plot’s denouement.

Ultimately, Chrotilda’s emotions overpower her and she admits her disguise to both in-text and external audiences, along with deciding to spare Clotair once he has expressed genuine repentance. Dying, Chrotilda recognizes her mercy as a weakness in a revenger, and she highlights the link between her failing and her femininity:

I should have kill’d thee, King, and had put on
A masculine spirit to perform the deed;
Alas how frail our resolutions are!
A woman’s weakness conquer’d my revenge:
I’d spirit enough to quit my Father’s wrongs...
But there is something dwells upon thy brow
Which did persuade me to humanitie;
Thou injurd’st me, yet I would fall by thee;
And like to my soft sex, I fall and perish. (5.2.452-63)

In Chrotilda’s dying speech, she is ambivalent about her transformation. She clearly still believes in the justice of her revenge plot, wishing that she could finish her work of revenge. She blames herself for her failing, and seems not to recognize the extraordinary nature of what she did accomplish.⁵³ She cites ‘a woman’s weakness’ for her downfall, yet she was able to act and maintain her disguise for as long as the male Epicoene did and with as much secretive success, though notably she was unmasked by her own weakness rather than another revealing the plot’s completion. She performs many violent revenge actions to ‘quit [her] Father’, not adhering to gender roles forbidding female violence – I

⁵² Laura Levine, *Men in Women’s Clothing: Anti-Theatricality and Effeminization 1579-1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 15.

⁵³ Bowers implicitly highlights the degree to which Chrotilda was *not* hampered by her true sex in the rest of her plot when he describes her as, ‘as evil and villainous a revenger as ever trod the stage’ (p. 241).

think here of characters such as Viola in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* who balks at the need to duel in her male (eunuch) disguise, let alone commit murder as Chrotilda does. Chrotilda will indeed 'fall and perish' 'like to [her] soft sex', but it is her 'masculine spirit' that is witnessed by the audience throughout the play. Chrotilda's ultimate admission of weakness reveals her as 'a manifest woman' (*Epicoene* 3.4.39) but that revelation is complicated by the memory of her violent disguise.

The control Epicoene and Chrotilda display over their disguises ultimately reinforces perceptions about female secrecy and performance. Epicoene's disguise is infallible until Dauphine reveals him, whereas Chrotilda's disguise ultimately dissolves in a welter of female emotion. Epicoene *performs* female extremes: he is a plausible caricature of both a silent woman and a shrew, but he remains a caricature. Male temperance is his lived experience, allowing his performances to stand untainted by his actual sex. When read this way, Epicoene's performance cuts against Dunnum's argument that,

By the end of the play, all the performances that construct authentic identity are shown to be operating under a broader performance that hides authentic identity. The revelation at the end of the play is used in *Epicoene* to uncover the true characteristics (and gender) of the title character. Performance is shown, after all, to hide authenticity not construct it.⁵⁴

I argue that Epicoene, as opposed to the other characters Dunnum discusses, reveals his masculinity through his performance rather than hiding it. Epicoene in fact displays himself at every turn through his consummate acting. Epicoene constantly performs himself, in that he performs better and with more consistency than any woman could.

Chrotilda, on the other hand, *lives* the female excess that Epicoene merely feigns. Her performance is an impressive act of containment as opposed to Epicoene's constant pretense of excess.⁵⁵ In her containment, Chrotilda again serves as a foil against Fredigond, whose performances involve feigning proper female emotions which she does not actually feel. Chrotilda performs her stoic evil shockingly well, though ultimately her emotions escape containment. Rackin posits that *Epicoene* 'attempts to contain this [gender] subversive potential by drawing sharp distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate uses of dramatic representation'.⁵⁶ *The Fatal Contract* works similarly, with

⁵⁴ Dunnum, 241.

⁵⁵ Ironically, the male actor portraying Chrotilda's act would be assumed to have no such difficulty containing himself.

⁵⁶ Rackin, 35.

Chrotilda contrasting with Fredigond in her acting and ultimately falling victim to her own female emotion. While both texts use such contrast to mediate their subversive potentials, their subversions are framed in opposing ways: Epicoene's subversion lies in his acceptably-male chameleon ability, whereas Chrotilda's subversive disguise is tempered by her ultimate feminine failure. These conclusions again recall Daw's schema, in which male vice is female virtue, and vice-versa. However, while the characters are mediated by their respective masculine and feminine acting abilities, Daw's dualism is constantly questioned by the success of the impersonations throughout the bulk of both plays.

Genre Expectations and Refutations

Gendered expectations of acting underpin the portrayal of those moments of acting in both plays; genre also produces its own set of gendered expectations which similarly influences the way each disguised character can act. *Epicoene* concludes with a clear feeling of gender resolution: the correct social positions of men and women are largely upheld, and the subversive actorly potential represented by a female Epicoene is diffused by his revelation as male. This ending is less comforting when examined through a generic lens. As Slights argues, 'The secret that Jonson explodes with the transvestite bombshell at the end of *Epicoene* leaves the social order of comedy something of a wreck'.⁵⁷ With Epicoene revealed as male, Morose is no longer married; additionally, no young women are presented as acceptable love interests for Dauphine or the other gallants, making the expected comic feeling of regeneration impossible.⁵⁸ Comic disguise generally functions inclusively, with the audience enjoying the protagonist's superior knowledge.⁵⁹ In *Epicoene*, this pleasurable drawing-in of the audience is refused. Instead of a participatory plot in which the audience is aligned with the disguised hero or heroine, they experience the same trick as the repulsive Morose.⁶⁰ Victor Oscar Freeburg argues that an audience can only understand and enjoy the play with foreknowledge:

⁵⁷ Slights, p. 95.

⁵⁸ Mary Beth Rose, *The Expense of Spirit: Love and Sexuality in English Renaissance Drama* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991) reaches a similar conclusion: '*Epicoene* ostentatiously depicts not the construction but the undoing of a marriage, ending not in a promise of consummation, but in a declaration of impotence' (p. 58).

⁵⁹ Hyland, p. 60.

⁶⁰ Slights states this phenomenon clearly: 'The audience does not share a superior position with the author, but is instead duped by the same trick that undoes Morose' (p. 81).

The average spectator would rather be given certain dramatic causes and conflicts with a chance to guess at the probable outcome, than watch the unfolding of a dramatic story which ends with the disconcerting revelation that he had all the way through been ignorant of the cardinal fact in the story.⁶¹

Even those ‘in on’ the joke are allied with Dauphine, a man grasping after his uncle’s fortune, rather than a clever protagonist working towards his or her comic, heteroromantic, resolution. Rackin argues that this payoff is personally-oriented: Jonson ‘gratifies a status-hungry audience’ and ‘satisfies a man’s desire for money’.⁶² This reading offers an option for audience inclusion, but it is a cruel and avaricious version of participation, with the victors characterized by traits that are simultaneously pilloried in this play and in others of Jonson’s oeuvre. While the gendered resolution reestablishes norms, the treatment of genre throughout the play is more subversive.⁶³

Epicoene glories in uncomfortable sexual situations, a common comic trope which enhances the confusion about the bodies beneath the actors’ costumes. Scenarios involving indeterminately-gendered characters in sexually-charged encounters were frequent in both English and continental drama, typically with comic intentions.⁶⁴ *Epicoene* plays with this trope, increasing the stakes by denying the ‘prophylaxis’ of warning the audience with an early scene establishing *Epicoene*’s true identity.⁶⁵ In addition to removing the traditional audience pleasure of recognizing double-speak in a gender-bent comedy, the play titillates its audience with its thwarted eroticism and hints of socially-subversive relationships such as the ‘ingle’ Truewit refers to (1.1.23). When

⁶¹ Victor Oscar Freeburg, *Disguise Plots in Elizabethan Drama: A Study in Stage Tradition*, Columbia University Studies in English and Comparative Literature (New York: B. Blom, 1965), p. 13. Admittedly, Freeburg, like Bowers, writes in an earlier time when the boundaries between personal aesthetic judgments and formal criticism were more slippery. He himself admits that, ‘Whether such surprise is good dramaturgy may be a question of taste’ (p. 13). However, his position about the necessity of foreknowledge for understanding the play in real-time is important to note.

⁶² Rackin, 37.

⁶³ Another option, of course, is for the audience to resist any alliance with characters in favor of judgment, though even in this situation, it is important for a sense of alignment to exist between the audience and the characters they judge. This sort of situation is discussed in more depth by Meg F. Pearson, ‘Audience as Witness in *Edward II*’, in *Imagining the Audience in Early Modern Drama, 1558-1642*, ed. by Nova Myhill and Jennifer Low (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 93–112 (p. 96).

⁶⁴ Rachel Poulsen, ‘Women Performing Homoerotic Desire in English and Italian Comedy: *La Calendaria*, *Gl’Ingannati*, and *Twelfth Night*’, in *Women Players in England 1500-1660: Beyond the All-Male Stage*, ed. by Pamela Allen Brown and Peter Parolin (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), pp. 171–91 (p. 181).

⁶⁵ Jeffrey Masten, *Queer Philologies: Sex, Language, and Affect in Shakespeare’s Time* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), p. 121.

Dauphine's trick is revealed, he encourages the audience to partake in a similarly-perverse relationship due to the complex eroticism surrounding boy actors. Not only are the boys sexualized by their feminine garb, but knowledge of continental actresses may well have contributed to the sense of ambiguity surrounding the body beneath the garb.⁶⁶ In *Epicoene*, Jonson actively encourages this sort of erotic curiosity. For example, Daw and LaFoole give detailed accounts of their fictionalized affairs with Epicoene, goading the audience to imagine those unstaged scenes.⁶⁷ They describe each other's affairs, each seeming as intimate with the other's actions as with his own:

LA FOOLE Sir John had her maidenhead, indeed.

DAW Oh, it pleases him to say so, sir, but Sir Amorous knows what's what as well. (5.1.81-3)

The audience is encouraged to imagine congress with Epicoene in this scene, much as Morose himself is. When the trick is revealed, the audience experiences a collapse of the identities of the character and boy actor, potentially leading to the conclusion that they were indeed fetishizing a man, or at least a boy, all along.⁶⁸ The layers of erotic tension erected throughout the play collapse as Morose and the audience discover that the object of their affections and speculations is male; in Rackin's words, 'the transvestite figure is finally revealed as the boy the actor who played him really was'.⁶⁹ While the play ends with proper gender roles affirmed, the play forces its audience to confront their fetishization of the actor and his indeterminate body.⁷⁰

It may seem that the conclusion of *The Fatal Contract* similarly tricks the audience to share the perspective of the morally bankrupt who were duped by Chrotilda. As in

⁶⁶ Brown and Parolin, 'Introduction' in *Women Players in England 1500-1660: Beyond the All-Male Stage*, ed. by Pamela Allen Brown and Peter Parolin (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), pp. 1-21 (p. 7).

⁶⁷ Lorna Hutson, *Circumstantial Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) suggests that a richly-detailed narrative, full of explanatory circumstance, encourages characters to be conceived of in an 'extramimetic' way – the audience extrapolates about their past and future as though they were real people (p. 41). In Epicoene's case, these details about her supposed affairs encourage such speculation in a highly-sexualized way.

⁶⁸ As Barbour notes, such a realization is not entirely subversive, as 'boy actors are fairly safe objects of mutual enjoyment' for both men and women (1017).

⁶⁹ Rackin, 36.

⁷⁰ Hobgood argues that an audience may participate in theater by refuting, rather than affiliating with, an unruly body, and that sort of participation may be at stake here (p. 158). However, she also notes that Jonson tends to obsess over the possibility that the audience's proper participation may not occur, particularly as 'incorrect' audience reactions may be contagious (pp. 160, 167). The end of *Epicoene* seems particularly at risk for such a miscue as audiences of various levels of theatrical discernment may encounter each other.

Epicoene, both villains and audiences are deceived by the plotter's disguise. Freeburg criticizes this type of 'retro-disguise plot' as 'too obviously a *coup de théâtre*... it did not permit appreciation of ironical situations or dramatic misunderstandings'.⁷¹ However, the generic expectations of *The Fatal Contract* are vastly different from those of comic disguise plots, given its status as a revenge play using the conventions of revenge to the point of derivativeness.⁷² If nothing else, the use of *coup de théâtre* is commonplace in revenge spectacles. Like comedy, revenge tragedy is a genre that frequently employs disguise – as Hyland establishes, revenge tragedy differs from other tragedy in that disguise is acceptable and even expected.⁷³ Unlike the use of disguise in *Epicoene*, disguise in *The Fatal Contract* is used in traditional ways, other than the single element of the audience's surprise. As in other revenge plots, the revenger assumes a disguise to gain the enemies' trust and manipulate them into a fatal web. While the surprise revelation is an innovation of this play, as is Chrotilda's gender (revengers typically being male), the notion of a revenger's disguise used in this way is entirely to be expected.⁷⁴ Meg Pearson discusses the ways that audiences are enabled as witnesses and judges in the theater, and that as such, they may be primed not to believe the evidence of their eyes;⁷⁵ these standards, in my view, are particularly heightened in a revenge plot where determining the revenger's moral and legal justifications for their actions is one of the main forms of potential audience engagement, and the revenger's disguise is an assumed aspect of the plot.

Chrotilda adheres to generic expectations not only through her disguise, but also in terms of the moral and affective arc expected of a revenger. At the end of the play, the audience is asked to sympathize with Chrotilda despite both the trick itself and their long-held opinions of the detestable Eunuch – the moral reversal that Bowers finds so objectionable. However, the revenge genre is one of complicated heroes. Allison Hobgood argues that one of the main goals of revenge tragedy is to encourage an affective response in the audience, though I would posit that depending on the audience's more intellectual judgment, the affective response could be one of either sympathy or disgust.⁷⁶ The

⁷¹ Freeburg, p. 86.

⁷² Bowers, pp. 247 and *passim*.

⁷³ Hyland, pp. 72-3.

⁷⁴ The list of disguise-driven revengers includes Vindice in *The Revenger's Tragedy* and Antonio in *Antonio's Revenge*. The suspect manias of Hamlet, Titus Andronicus, and *The Spanish Tragedy's* Hieronimo are also often considered a response to this disguise impulse.

⁷⁵ Pearson, pp. 96-8.

⁷⁶ Hobgood, p. 93 and *passim*. Michael Neill, "'Wits Most Accomplished Senate": The Audience of the Caroline Private Theaters', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 18.2 (1978), 341-60 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/450366>> further argues that in the Caroline period, the engagement of the passions

revenge genre has a well-established moral arc that the audience can expect and to which *The Fatal Contract* adheres – unlike the morally-ambivalent ending of *Epicoene*. Some revengers are indeed heroes, and others are positioned as villains. In either case, the audience is allied with them through the pleasure of witnessing their intricate plotting and from the asides explaining the form of that plot.⁷⁷ Apart from her gender, Chrotilda adheres closely to this script, which results in her revelation clarifying the revenge arc rather than muddying it. Initially, the Eunuch appears motiveless, embroiled in a complex revenge plot but with no clear cause for hatred. When she reveals her identity, however, Chrotilda is reintroduced as a highly-motivated and sympathetic revenger, a victim of sexual trauma who deserves recompense for her own pain and that of her family.

This discovery of motive reveals an inversion of the treatment of secrecy between the two plays. Chrotilda's body is confused at the end of the play, as she never removes her costume and remains suspended in the tension created by a boy actor playing a woman, playing a man.⁷⁸ Her motivations, however, are made entirely lucid. In *Epicoene*, the reverse occurs: Epicoene removes his costume and the matrix of gender presented by an actor's female impersonation collapses coherently into a single male body. However, his motivations are muddled: he was 'brought up' by Dauphine for six months, but gains no clear benefit from his participation in the trick (5.4.190).⁷⁹ Epicoene is suddenly demotivated by his unmasking, whereas Chrotilda's motivation is clarified, further emphasizing her conformity to revenge norms.

Not only does Chrotilda conform to the scripted identity of the revenger, but also to the norms of tragic cross-dressing. There are generally more precedents for Chrotilda to imitate than Epicoene, providing a clearer model to analyze. While disguise as a eunuch is an infrequent variation on the female-page trope, it is not unheard of, as Shakespeare's Viola demonstrates. The boy-bride trope, however, appears far less frequently than the

was considered a theatrical pleasure in its own right – presumably regardless of the ethical implications of a more intellectual judgment (p. 355).

⁷⁷ John Kerrigan, *Revenge Tragedy: Aeschylus to Armageddon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), notes that the genre 'is founded on the principle that violence can provide satisfactions which are, at least in prospect, bound up with form and signification, and so with the aesthetic as well as with the ethical' (p. 19). Modern interpretations of the genre tend to follow Kerrigan, and are less concerned with the clear morality Bowers seeks.

⁷⁸ Hyland discusses the added complication of Chrotilda's blackface in this scene (pp. 149-50).

⁷⁹ Ari Friedlander, 'Mastery, Masculinity, and Sexual Cozening in Ben Jonson's *Epicoene*', *SEL Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 53.2 (2013), 379–99 <<https://doi.org/10.1353/sel.2013.0021>> raises the point that Epicoene's ambiguous motive adds another layer of tension to the play – without any obvious reason to stay faithful, Epicoene could in fact betray his benefactor for further gain, a tension further emphasized by the female Epicoene who resembles contemporary female criminals (389-90).

female page.⁸⁰ Moreover, Michael Shapiro establishes that women in tragic plotlines generally use their disguises to increase female vulnerability and pathos.⁸¹ While Chrotilda's actions at the outset of the play are unhindered by such female weakness, the end of the play leans into those female stereotypes as pity ultimately stops her hand and she reveals her female vulnerability. She laments her inability to kill Clotair: 'Alas how frail our resolutions are! / A woman's weakness conquer'd my revenge' (5.2.454-5). This reversal of the cruel Eunuch's strength highlights the female Chrotilda's vulnerability. When she dies, it is, 'Like to my soft sex', drawing attention to the disconnect not only between the personas she has presented, but also between her identity and the black male costume she still wears. When Chrotilda is revealed as both a rape victim and as a white woman who is subject to women's weaknesses, the sympathy already garnered by a revenger's traditional bond with the audience is multiplied.⁸² While *The Fatal Contract* upsets certain revenge expectations because of the strange trick of Chrotilda's true identity,⁸³ it largely reinforces the plotting and gender norms of the genre, resulting in a trick more easily stomachable than that in *Epicoene*.

Neither Epicoene nor Chrotilda is quite 'a man as others are', or a woman as others are – this is both their threat and their mediation (*The Fatal Contract* 1.2.53). It would do these plays a disservice to conclude definitively about the genders of these characters and their adherence to gender stereotypes, because the characters themselves do not. Both characters end the play still in a state of partial or complete physical disguise, continuing the liminality they enact throughout the plays. It is this liminality that gives each power. Because each partakes in both genders and neither, they have a freedom of movement. Epicoene has natural insight into the male mind, allowing him his excellent portrayal of male fears. As an assumed woman, however, he can infiltrate the female spaces of the Collegiates as well as Morose's masculine household.⁸⁴ Similarly, the Eunuch is masculine enough to carry out violence on behalf of herself and others, yet is feminized enough to become Fredigond's confidant – in Crawford's words, the castrate is a 'mobile

⁸⁰ Michael Shapiro, *Gender in Play on the Shakespearean Stage: Boy Heroines and Female Pages* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), pp. 34-6.

⁸¹ Ibid, p. 175.

⁸² Depending on the actors, the audience may even become involved in weeping – as Steggle argues, onstage weeping likely produced a resonant off-stage response in audience members (p. 98). If Chrotilda mourned her own demise, or those left living did, the audience may have experienced such an affective resonance.

⁸³ Dressel discusses in more depth the apparent paradox of Chrotilda's forgiveness despite her violation of Renaissance taboos against female violence.

⁸⁴ Truewit assures the Collegiates that Epicoene will keep 'any mysteries' that 'you have discovered to him', highlighting the intimacy Epicoene had with them (5.4.230-1).

gender'.⁸⁵ These characters, strange and subversive, have a power unique to them, a chameleon power to subvert gender expectations and restrictions and emerge unique. Slights argues that, 'Neither man nor boy... Epicoene theatrically represents a gap in the social structures that legitimate the exercise and transfer of male prerogative and power'.⁸⁶ I agree with his position but take it even further. Epicoene and his more feminine mirror Chrotilda not only subvert the social structures dividing man and boy, but those dividing man and woman, boy and woman. In doing so, they mirror the actors playing them, whose identities as boys place them in a similarly subversive situation. Barbour says of Epicoene that, 'The audience is made to see that boy and woman have been interchangeable'⁸⁷ – but by looking at the two plays in parallel, I find that the eunuch and woman are similarly interchangeable, and boy, woman, and eunuch are all presented with the ability to impersonate maleness, particularly the maleness of acting. The structures of the plays themselves mirror this indeterminacy: *Epicoene* subverts comic conventions so it begins in the guise of a love plot and ends as a satire, while revenge tragedy is innately a mixed genre that often includes comic elements and resists tragic norms. These plays push the boundaries of propriety, threatening even the line dividing theater from reality. Their protagonists both highlight the dangers of female acting, and while both plays contain that danger, they do so in a ways that leave open questions. While the danger of female acting (and speech, and violence, and sexuality) is diffused, the danger of acting more generally is not, and if anything, the plays lean into the charges leveled against the stage. They present characters seductive in their indeterminacy, who seduce both with their epicene, potentially-safe bodies, and with their fantastic acting, bewitching the audience with the power of the theater.

⁸⁵ Crawford, 60.

⁸⁶ Slights, p. 103.

⁸⁷ Barbour, 1016.