

“Weele pay for that we take”: Regendering Consumption in *Tis Merry When Gossips Meete*

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ABSTRACT Samuel Rowlands’s *Tis Merry When Gossips Meete* has typically been interpreted as a satire that mocks and critiques female overconsumption with its lively depiction of three women who meet in a tavern to eat, drink, and talk. Critics often assume that the pamphlet was intended to appeal to a male readership, and the first edition of 1602 does, to some extent, support such a conclusion. But *Tis Merry* was published eight times between 1602 and 1675, and both the main text and the paratext saw multiple revisions. Sara D. Luttfriing argues that these revisions, as well as scenes of female consumption that remained unchanged, work to depict women’s sexual, economic, and cultural consumption in a more positive light. In fact, many of the revisions suggest that later publishers repositioned the pamphlet to appeal to female reader-consumers. **KEYWORDS:** *Well met Gossip*; early modern satiric pamphlets; seventeenth-century broadside ballads; depictions of women as consumers; female readership of pamphlets

❧ IN SAMUEL ROWLANDS’S *Tis Merry When Gossips Meete*, a Widow, a Wife, and a Maid gather in a private room in a tavern where they enjoy wine and sausages, discuss men and marriage, purchase entertainment from a fiddler’s boy, and finally pay their bill and depart. Previous scholarship has tended to interpret the pamphlet as a satire of female overconsumption that depicts men as the proper consumers of both books and women, and the prefatory matter of the first edition does, to some extent, support such a reading. Less frequently noted, however, are the changes the text underwent over the course of its eight editions between 1602 and 1675, which provide evidence that the pamphlet itself was increasingly repositioned to appeal to female consumers. These revisions, as well as scenes of female consumption that remained unchanged over much of the seventeenth century, work to challenge the notion that

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women must be either the passive objects of male consumption or voracious overconsumers. By shedding light on *Tis Merry's* depiction of women's roles in early modern consumer society, this essay seeks to enlarge our understanding of the multiplicity of the pamphlet's potential audiences and the meanings they might have made of its text.

The 1602 edition of *Tis Merry* contains four prefatory pieces: first, a poetic address to "Gentlemen" readers; second, a prose dialogue titled "A Conference betweene a Gentleman and a Prentice"; third, a poem addressed "To all the pleasaunt conceited London Gentlewomen that are friendes to mirth, and enemies to dull Melancholy"; and fourth, a poem signed by "Joh. Strange" titled "In Commendation of this Booke."¹ While all of these pieces have helped to shape interpretations of the pamphlet as a whole, "A Conference" has garnered the most attention. In this vignette, a gentleman shops for books with the help of a bookseller's apprentice. The Gentleman would prefer something by Robert Greene or Thomas Nashe, but the Prentice persuades him to consider a new book: Rowlands's *Tis Merry*. In his sales pitch, the Prentice argues that the book will give the Gentleman intimate access to the three women it depicts: "For I am sure you are in Love, or at least will bee, with one of these three: or say you deale but with two, The Widdow and the Mayde; because the Wife is another mans commoditie: is it not a prettie thing to carry Wife, Mayde, and Widdow in your pocket[?]"² In this passage, women and books are linked as sexual/sexualized commodities that are exchanged between men and can be carried in the erotically charged space of their pockets; a man can possess another man's "commodity" (that is, wife) by purchasing a printed version of her. Previous criticism of this scene has characterized *Tis Merry* as "a female commodity," "a sexualized text," and "an intimately possessed sexual commodity" that promises its male readers "forbidden sexual intimacy,"

1. Most critics attribute the first three pieces of prefatory material to Rowlands, although only the first bears his initials. The second and third pieces are unsigned, and the fourth is signed by "Joh. Strange," who as far as I know has not been identified. The body of *Tis Merry* is written in a distinctive six-line iambic pentameter stanza (rhyme scheme: ababcc) that was a hallmark of Rowlands's; see *The Complete Works of Samuel Rowlands, 1598–1628*, vol. 1 (New York, 1966), 5–6, 8. The first and third pieces are also written in this style (the second is in prose), which might serve as evidence of Rowlands's authorship. Even if we take Rowlands's authorship of the first three pieces as a given, however, we should not assume that he was responsible for determining how the pamphlet would be marketed; see Helen Smith and Louise Wilson, *Renaissance Paratexts*, ed. Smith and Wilson (Cambridge, 2011), Introduction, 8–10. Previous studies of *Tis Merry's* prefatory matter have acknowledged these ambiguities, even when they attribute authorship to Rowlands. For example, Wendy Wall notes that the marketing techniques that Rowlands dramatizes and deploys in "A Conference" are associated with printers: "In dramatizing how a printer personifies his text to tout the advantages of possessing another man's female writing, Rowlands exposes the game of titillation and sexual rivalry that underscored the marketing of books"; see *The Imprint of Gender: Authorship and Publication in the English Renaissance* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1993), 205. Rowlands's dramatization of the apprentice's sales techniques as part of his own attempt to market the pamphlet suggests the potential for collaborative overlap in the paratextual marketing efforts of authors and stationers.

2. Samuel Rowlands, *Tis Merry when Gossips meet*, in "Custome Is an Idiot": *Jacobean Pamphlet Literature on Women*, ed. Susan Gushee O'Malley (Urbana, Ill., 2004), 50. References to *Tis Merry* are cited henceforward in the text.

“privatized sexual pleasure,” and “the possibility of mastering three women.”³ The dichotomies are clear: women are commodities and objects of male control and sexual desire, while men are purchasers and owners who enjoy the sexual pleasure of the “feminized book.”⁴

Although the “Conference” depicts men as the primary purchasers and readers of *Tis Merry*, the address to “all the pleasaunt conceited London Gentlewomen” imagines a female audience (51). This poem praises women exactly like the Widow, Wife, and Maid: “good liquor taking Dames” who love to drink and talk, as opposed to “sullen sad-ones” who are too proud and solemn to spend time with their friends in taverns (52, 51). Alexandra Halasz argues that the poem encourages women “to claim the space of consumption as their own,” but she also notes that the pamphlet limits female consumption to devalued “ephemeral pleasures” like food and drink, which must be purchased repeatedly (and perhaps excessively). Men like the Gentleman, by contrast, purchase printed texts that can be enjoyed over and over, and hence generate value.⁵ Although the address to women ostensibly sets out to praise good-humored women who drink, it also shows that female consumption is vulnerable to critique.⁶ The last line of the address warns female readers who might seek to emulate the women in the pamphlet against excess in both speech and drinking: “Tune your Tongues low, take not a Cuppe to hie” (53). Ultimately, the address to women attempts to regulate female consumption even while praising it, suggesting that female consumers are always walking a fine line between too little and too much, and that by crossing that line they open themselves up to censure.

The issues of censure and female overconsumption are also treated in the other two prefatory poems that appear in the first edition. In the address to “Gentlemen” readers, Rowlands ostensibly celebrates his three “*blithe Wenches*,” but his description also calls their behavior into question: “Wife, Widdow, Mayde, / *Did kindly meete, and talke, and drinke like men, / And one spent more then sixe of tother payde*” (47). This poem suggests that the women are disregarding appropriate gender roles by acting “like men” and that they are guilty of gross overconsumption, since one spends enough for six. “In Commendation of this Booke” similarly implies disapproval of the women’s behavior. Although it claims that *Tis Merry* “medlest not with *Wives* which civill bee,” it does acknowledge that the pamphlet critiques “wanton” widows and “mean” (that is,

3. Susan Gushee O’Malley, “‘Weele have a Wench shall be our Poet’: Samuel Rowlands’ Gossip Pamphlets,” in *Debating Gender in Early Modern England, 1500–1700*, ed. Cristina Malcolmson and Mihoko Suzuki (New York, 2002), 122; Lori Humphrey Newcomb, *Reading Popular Romance in Early Modern England* (New York, 2002), 103, 102; Alexandra Halasz, *The Marketplace of Print: Pamphlets and the Public Sphere in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 1997), 172; Wall, *Imprint of Gender*, 204.

4. Wall, *Imprint of Gender*, 205.

5. Halasz, *Marketplace of Print*, 173.

6. As Shannon Miller points out, early modern anxieties about the “uncontrollable” capitalist market economy were frequently coupled with fears about “women’s overflowing and (sexually) uncontrollable bodies” and their “excessive economic consumption”; see “Consuming Mothers / Consuming Merchants: The Carnavalesque Economy of Jacobean City Comedy,” *Modern Language Studies* 26, nos. 2 and 3 (1996): 89, 81.

inferior) maids (28). Thus, despite the fervent praise given to “good liquor taking Dames” and “right loving Gossips” in the address to women readers, the prefatory matter of the 1602 edition suggests that there is something illicit, controversial, and improper about the kinds of female behavior portrayed in the pamphlet. In their focus on appropriate gender roles in consumer society, these pieces imply that women who consume too freely are usurping roles properly belonging to men, thus opening themselves up to censure and abuse if they “take a cup too high.”

The ambiguous depiction of female consumers in the 1602 prefatory matter tends to inflect how critics of the pamphlet interpret the scenes of consumption in the main text. Susan Gushee O’Malley argues that Rowlands intended his pamphlet “to satirize women who drink together in public taverns,” thus “express[ing] the anxiety often felt by male writers of the early modern period when women congregated together.”⁷ Similarly, Bernard Capp notes that “beneath [*Tis Merry’s*] light-hearted tone there runs a clear undertow of disapproval.”⁸ Critics assume that for male readers, the depictions of women eating, drinking, and gossiping would elicit mocking laughter tinged with anxiety, an anxiety that can be alleviated only through framing the women, like the book, as sexualized objects that are ultimately under the control of the male author and readers. However, criticism of the pamphlet also tends to hedge when discussing its satirization of women. Linda Woodbridge claims that *Tis Merry* “fails to accomplish its satiric objectives and bumbles instead into being a work of art,” and she posits that some early modern women may have read the pamphlet against the grain: “this is the sort of antifeminist literature that women themselves might have enjoyed.”⁹ Other critics are more specific about the ways in which women might have enjoyed the pamphlet. Although O’Malley assumes the text is meant to satirize women, she also speculates that women readers might have “regard[ed] the representation of the women’s friendships and their ability to gather together to talk and pay their own bills as something to be emulated.”¹⁰ Similarly, despite the disapproval that Capp identifies, he notes that the tavern in *Tis Merry* can be read “as a site of female empowerment.”¹¹

In this essay, I demonstrate that sympathetic readings of women as consumers became more plausible over the course of *Tis Merry’s* publication history. I will first analyze scenes from the main text that remain unchanged in all editions of the pamphlet, arguing that these scenes offer a more nuanced view of female consumption than that found in the original prefatory material. I will then examine the course of *Tis Merry’s* life as a commodity by analyzing revisions to later editions and its various publishers’ specialties. In doing so, I will show the ways in which the pamphlet’s publishers positioned it within the marketplace of print, as well as how the specializations of its

7. O’Malley, “Weele have a Wench,” 133, 122.

8. Bernard Capp, *When Gossips Meet: Women, Family, and Neighbourhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2003), 49.

9. Linda Woodbridge, *Women and the English Renaissance: Literature and the Nature of Womanhood, 1540–1620* (Urbana, Ill., 1984), 224, 236.

10. O’Malley, “Weele have a Wench,” 133.

11. Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, 382.

publishers shed light on its potential audiences. Ultimately, I will argue that changes to the pamphlet's content and appearance, as well as its acquisition by a sequence of publishers, eventually repositioned the pamphlet itself as a commodity for women. Close attention to *Tis Merry's* publication history can thus challenge assumptions about who its early modern readers were and how they might have understood the scenes of female consumption the pamphlet depicts.

Commodities, Gender, and Consumption in *Tis Merry*

Tis Merry's scenes of female consumption can best be understood in the context of the explosion of consumer goods for both privileged and laboring-class households that occurred during the early modern period. As Joan Thirsk demonstrates, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw a sharp rise in "projects" that promoted the increased domestic production of agricultural and manufactured goods.¹² The result was a "magnificent range of choice available to the customer in seventeenth-century England"; households were acquiring not only more goods but also more types of goods, and consumers had many options.¹³ Although the owner of these goods was technically the male head of household, the care and use of many items (such as foodstuffs and cooking implements) frequently fell to women, thus giving women as well as men a sense of ownership and involvement in consumer society: "Women of every social and matrimonial status assumed a kind of 'psychological' or 'moral' proprietorship of goods and possessions through their knowledge, labour, and customary use."¹⁴ Early modern projects included the production of goods designed specifically for women, such as "ruffs, masks, busks, muffs, fans, periwigs, bodkins, and embroidered gloves."¹⁵ Both directly and indirectly, women were part of the customer base for this wave of new products, and as such, their tastes, needs, and preferences shaped the marketplace of consumer goods.

In the main text of *Tis Merry*, the Widow, Wife, and Maid understand not only their power as consumers but also their vulnerability as objects of exchange and consumption on the marriage market. In their extensive conversations about men, the languages of courtship and commodities combine as the women strategize about how best to negotiate the interrelated marketplaces of consumer goods and sexual relationships. The Widow points out that maids, unlike wives, are plied with love tokens, and thus seems to depict unmarried women as commodities that can be purchased during courtship: "Sutors with Gifts continuall seeke to gaine / Their Mistresse love." The Wife confirms the truth of this by referring to her own experience as an unmarried woman:

12. Joan Thirsk, *Economic Policy and Projects: The Development of a Consumer Society in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1978), 1–2.

13. *Ibid.*, 107; Lena Cowen Orlin, *Private Matters and Public Culture in Post-Reformation England* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1994), 255–59.

14. Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England, 1550–1720* (Oxford, 1998), 219–20; Natasha Korda, *Shakespeare's Domestic Economies: Gender and Property in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia, 2002), 29.

15. Thirsk, *Economic Policy*, 13.

“In conscience I had twenty paire of Gloves / . . . / Garters, Knives, Purses, Girdles, store of Rings, / And many a hundred dainty pretty things” (32). The social identity of the unmarried woman is collapsed into the feminized commodities used to purchase her; she is a “dainty pretty thing” that can be traded for other such things. Similarly, the Widow compares the temporary sexual value of a virgin with another commodity that has a limited shelf life: “Wine and Virginitie kept stale, drinke flat” (33). However, the Widow’s quip complicates the conventional notions of woman-as-commodity and man-as-consumer. While it implies that a woman’s virginity is a commodity to be consumed by men, the consumption of wine is less obviously gendered. Men can drink wine, but so can women, and in the pamphlet it is the women who eagerly consume this particular commodity. The two terms in the Widow’s metaphor (virginity and wine) neatly depict women as *both* commodities and consumers. Moreover, the mode of courtship described by the women allows for more female agency than the sexualized purchase depicted in the “Conference betweene a Gentleman and a Prentice.”

In the “Conference,” the Gentleman buys the pamphlet from the Prentice for six pence and metaphorically gains possession of the three women. The women themselves literally have no say in the transaction, since ownership and control over their voices is included in the purchase: “[Y]ou may as it were conferre and heare them talke together when you will” (50). In the bookshop, the textualized women function merely as erotic commodities exchanged between men. In the tavern, however, the women describe the sexual/marital marketplace as a site of negotiated exchange between men *and* women, rather than of one-sided purchase and possession. Suitors “seeke to gaine / Their Mistresse love” with gifts, but the gifts are understood to represent “the bounty of their [the suitors’] loves” (32). Women are not merely objects purchased with other objects; instead, love is exchanged for love, and women negotiate these exchanges cannily. The Maid coolly explains the benefits of feigning a lack of interest in her suitors—of walking away from the deal, as it were: “T’is Maidens modesty to use deniall, / A willing offer commeth twice or th[r]ice” (33). By “using denial,” the woman being courted can assess the value of her suitor’s offer, since a suitor who will not persist after a rejection or two lacks seriousness and sincerity. She can also enhance her own value by displaying her “Maidens modesty.” Although a woman’s virginity, like wine, may grow “stale,” it is not to be handed over to the first man who shows up bearing gloves and garters. As active subjects within the marriage market, the women in the pamphlet understand the art of the deal.

Moreover, the women do not negotiate these deals based solely on material wealth, and the Maid forcefully refuses to be sold to the highest bidder. She rejects a young man who has been courting both her and her sister, sending the young woman a love token in the form of a bent coin (38). The Widow praises the young man’s “riches” and tells the Maid, “he will maintaine you well,” but the Maid dismisses the suitor because he does not meet her standards of physical beauty:

I tell you, I a propper man respect:
 De'e thinke that I with such a dwarffe will store me,
 That shall disgrace me when he goes before me.

Ile have a comely man from head to foot,
 In whose neat limbes no blemish can be spide:
 Whose Legge shall grace his stocking or his Boot,
 and weare his Rapier manly by his side[.]

(39)

According to the Maid, the young man in question resembles his courtship gift; like the bent coin he is rich yet deformed, and the Maid places physical attraction ahead of wealth when assessing his worth. Although the Widow emphasizes the social status that would accrue from being “maintained” by a man with such “riches,” the Maid redefines male worth and insists that the “disgrace” of being married to a “dwarffe” would in fact *devalue* her socially. The “comely man” is now the “dainty pretty thing” who is bedecked and conflated with commodity apparel. His “neat limbes” “grace his stocking or his Boot,” and his “Rapier” suggestively testifies to his virility. A situation that began with a wealthy man seemingly having his choice between two sisters who could be purchased with a single coin is reversed, and suddenly men are eroticized commodities that women may choose to accept or reject.

The Wife applauds the Maid’s logic and encourages her to follow her own inclinations in marriage: “Wench, let it be thy rule at any hand, / To make thy choyce even as thy mind doth stand” (39). This emphasis on women’s choice and preference is a common theme throughout the pamphlet, and it works to depict women as informed, judicious consumers in both the marriage market and the market of goods. Moreover, the pamphlet suggests that younger, less experienced women become savvy consumers by seeking guidance from their elders. Although the Wife tells the Maid to trust her own instincts and preferences, she also emphasizes the value of information that is orally transmitted within women’s social networks:

... when I was a Maide,
 and to the love of men began to bow,
 I gave great eare to that which women said,
 When they were merry met, as we are now[.]

(36–37)

The Wife claims that she benefited from practical advice from older women during “merry” meetings like the women’s own in the tavern, particularly advice concerning “the love of men.” Later, the Wife describes how she elicits kind treatment from her husband, framing her anecdote explicitly as a lesson for her younger friend: “This for instruction *Besse*, I have disclosed” (43). Just as she received instruction from older

women in her youth, she now shares her own knowledge with the Maid. Throughout the pamphlet, readers witness firsthand the wealth of information that a maid can glean from more experienced matrons. By depicting these interactions the text itself provides instruction as well as entertainment, particularly for female readers.¹⁶

During their discussion of marriage and husbands, the Widow instructs the Maid in how to be a connoisseur of men, claiming that a woman can measure a man's fidelity through physical attributes such as hair color. The Widow rapidly enumerates types of men ("Red-hair'd," "yellow flaxen haire," "Sanguine," "Nut-browne," "Aburne," "Waxen-colour") before declaring that "blacke-bearded-men" are best (35–36). At first glance, this catalogue seems to depict women as voracious sexual overconsumers. The Widow moves quickly from one type of man to the next, a verbal promiscuity that could suggest physical promiscuity. However, the Widow does not urge the Maid to take all kinds of men as her lovers. Instead, she lays out the qualities of each complexion so that the Maid might make a well-informed choice and avoid a disappointing marriage.

According to the Widow, it is men, not women, who are inclined to be sexually insatiable. She warns the Maid against accepting a red-haired suitor because "His turne cannot be serv'd with one or twaine" (35), and she claims that yellow-haired men love "as did the youth of Greece, / From every wench to gain a golden Fleece" (36). In contrast, the Widow asserts that "blacke-bearded-men, / Are precious Pearles" because of their "loyall hearts," and that as a result, theirs is the "rar'st complexion that you can devise" (36). The Wife serves as an example of how a woman's discerning choice can reap her a prize in a husband whose value is based on his attentiveness. She describes her husband as tender and solicitous, and the Widow dubs him "a Jewell" (35). In this formulation, women desire only what is "rar'st" and most valuable: the "precious pearl" of a loyal-hearted man or the "jewel" of a kind husband. Men, on the other hand, are apt to care only about quantity, not quality. In the first edition's prefatory bookshop scene, the Gentleman demands "all Greenes Bookes in one Volume[.] . . . I will have them every one, not any wanting" (49). In the main text, the Gentleman's voracious textual desire finds its complement in male sexual desire: the red-haired man's appetite cannot be satisfied by one or even two women, and a yellow-haired man will plunder "every wench" from whom he might "gain a golden Fleece." The Widow lists the types of men in order to demonstrate the variety of options from which a woman might choose, but unlike the men she critiques, the Widow promotes not overconsumption but informed consumption.

The women apply this logic of choice to the marketplace of food and drink as well as to the marriage market.¹⁷ Following the Wife's approval of the Maid's preference

16. My analysis of these scenes of instruction and the pamphlet's own instructive potential is indebted to the generous and insightful suggestions of an anonymous reader for the *Huntington Library Quarterly*.

17. As Thirsk notes, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw significant expansions not just in the quantity and variety of manufactured goods but also in the "expanding array of [food] ingredients made available by the growing volume of national and international trade"; see *Food in Early Modern England: Phases, Fads, Fashions, 1500–1760* (London, 2007), 34.

for handsome men, the conversation shifts to the types of food the three women do or do not like, such as goose, woodcock, pig, rabbit, hare, turkey, pigeon, and “butcher’s flesh” (40). This conversation is mildly off-color and subtly sexualized: the Wife bluntly admits that pork gives her intestinal distress, and the Maid’s dislike for “gross Butchers flesh” could reference the butcher’s own body as well as the meat he sells.¹⁸ Like the butcher, the women risk being transformed into consumables through conflation with the food they eat, since the meats they list resemble the terms of endearment that the Wife’s husband uses to address her: “my Dove, my Lamb, my pretty Conny” (35). However, despite the sexualization of some of the foods, this conversation is more about choice than unchecked desire and overconsumption. The women rattle off a long list of food choices that is similar to the list of men in the complexion conversation, but they do not want to consume all of these indiscriminately. Rather, they assume a variety of options from which they can make judicious choices. The Wife, for example, uses her purchasing power and control over the household food budget so as not to aggravate her husband’s dislike of goose: “T’is death to him to smell but a Goose-pye, / and therefore Goose-flesh never do I buy.” She also satisfies her cravings for “Partridge wing” and “Cherry-pye” while pregnant, and her husband promises that she “shalt lacke nought . . . that gold will buy” (40). When it comes to such commodities as foodstuffs, the women’s preferences matter, and their ability to indulge their tastes as purchasers and consumers is played out within the tavern itself.

Although the women do drink freely together, they demonstrate discernment, preference, and choice even amid their enthusiastic imbibing. After the women are served, the Wife asks the Widow to ensure the wine’s quality: “Pray tast it Couz, you know good Wine and Beere.” Only when the Widow confirms “[t]’is pretty wine in truth” do the other women fill their cups and drink (30). Later, the Wife comments that “this wine is not the worst,” and the Widow agrees: “Good-faith methinkes tis better than the first” (34). After drinking claret for a time, the Wife suggests they switch to sack, and the Widow orders the new drink along with some sausages. When the food arrives, the Widow urges her friends to eat up because “cold Puddings are not worth a pin,” and the Wife and Widow comment on how well the salty sausages complement the sugary sack (43). Although they certainly put their appetites to good use, the women make careful distinctions among the commodities on offer—between the first wine and the second, claret and sack, hot sausages and cold, salty food and sweet drink. They are discerning customers, but their discernment does not suggest a weak or dainty appetite, and they make fun of the Wife’s fastidious neighbor with her “penny pot of wine” who “takes in diet by the dram and pill” (42). Unlike the neighbor who eats and drinks in tiny amounts, the three women take great pleasure in their bountiful refreshments, which they select and consume with thought and care as well as enthusiasm.

Moreover, the women (particularly the Widow) are proud of their ability to pay for these commodities and very conscious of the power this gives them as consumers.

18. “Butcher’s flesh” or “butcher’s meat” is “meat sold by butchers (beef, mutton, veal, or lamb) as distinguished from poultry, game, fish, etc.”; see *OED*, s.v. “butcher’s meat / butcher-meat, *n.*”

At the end of the pamphlet, the three women catch one of the vintner's boys eavesdropping on their conversation and snickering at them. The Widow upbraids him for his behavior, defending herself and her friends by asserting their status as economic actors: "[W]eele pay for that we take" (44). The Widow reminds the boy of his low rank in relation to his paying customers by calling him "Maister Boy," "Base groome," "smooth-facst knave," and "slave" (44, 45). She then reminds him of the value of female customers to businesses such as the tavern: "Your Maisters lives [*sic*] you slave by such as we" (45). As paying customers whose consumption of goods and services helps keep the tavern in business, the women claim a status superior to that of the boy's employer, and the Widow lets the boy know in no uncertain terms who is (literally) boss: "I am your Mistris fellow" (44). Moreover, the Widow threatens to take their business elsewhere if the service does not meet her standards: "we come not heere to be abused, / There are more Tavernes besides your's in towne, / We can go where we might be curteous used" (45). As in the conversations about men and food, the Widow emphasizes the power that choice gives female consumers; if one tavern does not suit them, they can take their money elsewhere, and the owner of the offending establishment will suffer from the loss of their business.

According to the Widow, the ability to "pay for that [they] take" affords her and her friends social status and the right to demand respect from those whose establishments they patronize: "we have some credit where we dwell, / . . . Boyes should use their betters well" (45). The Widow's play on the word "credit" as meaning both good reputation and financial stability reinforces her claim to high social standing based on her position as a consumer.¹⁹ The Widow is justified in her expectations about the treatment she should receive from the tavern's staff. A second vintner's boy apologizes profusely for the first boy's rude behavior, calling his co-worker "a Clowne" and assuring the women that his master desires that they be well treated: "My Maisters will is for to use you kinde" (45). The disrespectful attitude of the first vintner's boy is the exception, not the rule, since the other male tavern workers value their female customers and wish to retain their business. Additions to the 1619 edition of the pamphlet further establish the women's authority as savvy consumers. These revisions, which consist of five additional stanzas, extend the women's scolding of the tavern waiters. The Wife contrasts herself and her friends with "Clownes" and "Fooles" from the country who, not being sophisticated Londoners, cannot tell good wine from bad: "You can per-swade them that their taste is bad, / And boast your wine, that there's no better drawne" (57, 58). Their waiter placates them in the hope that they will be repeat customers,

19. It is fitting that the Widow most strongly asserts these claims to economic authority and status, since she would be the most financially independent of the three, not being under the control of either husband or parents. Although the financial situations of widows varied widely depending on their social class and how much they had inherited from their husbands, the Widow in *Tis Merry* seems quite comfortable; see Mendelson and Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England*, 174–84. She has received a proposal of marriage from a "Gentleman" in possession of "prettie Lands," but she is in no hurry to remarry (35); when the Wife asks whether she is considering marrying again, the Widow coyly replies, "Truly I am, and am not" (34).

promising that if they return, they “shall command the best that’s [in] the Seller” (58). In both the original text and the later additions, the legitimacy of women’s participation in consumer culture is supported not only by the women themselves but also by the men with whom they deal.

As the Widow’s reaction to the first boy’s snickering suggests, however, the women understand that their status as female consumers is not without social risks. As the women are settling into their private tavern room and placing their orders, the Widow reassures her companions that they need not fear male observation: “No Lovers nor no Suter’s here, that sees it” (30). Since they are alone they can enjoy themselves freely, but in the company of men, women must feign delicacy:

If heere were men, I would not drinke it up
 For twenty pounds my selfe; but now al’s one:
 Sometime wet lip, and smell the Wine’s enuffe,
 And leese a kisse, rather then marre our Ruffe.
 (30)

Around men, the Widow claims, women are reluctant to appear as consumers of any kind; they delicately sip and sniff at wine they would prefer to “drink up,” they refuse kisses from men they may actually desire, and they would even turn down twenty pounds if it meant dropping their fastidious façade. Later, the Wife admits to having behaved in exactly this manner before she was married: “For Taverne, no young-man could get me to it, / Neither for Love, Gold, precious Stones, or Pearle” (38). Like the Widow, the Wife would refuse wine, love, and money in order to appear modest and “Mayden fine” in the eyes of men (38). The Maid tells a nearly identical story about her own behavior when drinking in the company of men: “Kissing the Cup, upon the Wine I frowne, / And so with smelling it, I set it downe.” The Maid goes on to laugh about how “simple fooles” urge her to drink more as they try to steal a “French salute [kiss],” but she modestly demurs: “I say sweet Sir, I can no wine digest” (44). As noted above, “deniall” is an unmarried woman’s best weapon; by refusing wine, wealth, and sexual advances, a woman can avoid accusations of immodest overconsumption, thus increasing her own social value and matrimonial choices. All three women have learned to moderate where, what, and how much they consume so that they might outwardly conform to standards of feminine conduct while still enjoying the stereotypically masculine pleasures and privileges of consumption. Like the Gentleman from the “Conference,” who “sit[s] alone privately” in order to enjoy the sexual thrill provided by the pamphlet (51), the women enjoy their private consumption of pleasurable commodities when they “meete, and talke, and drinke like men” (47).

In her insightful analysis of *Tis Merry*’s gendering of consumption, Halasz argues that the pamphlet’s original prefatory matter depicts a “divided image” of male vs. female consumption in which “the gentleman buys a pamphlet that generates value, . . . while the gossips buy drink and food, ‘consumables’ whose value is used up in

the act of consumption.”²⁰ While it is true that the commodities the women purchase in the course of their meeting at the tavern are “used up,” the act of purchase itself has an enduring value that continues after the commodity is gone. The pleasure of the food and drink may be ephemeral, as Halasz notes, but the socioeconomic credit that the women establish through their purchasing power does not disappear with the wine and sausages. Instead it accrues with each purchase, and the women are able to “spend” this credit to bolster their positions in the marketplace, as the Widow does when she demands respect from the tavern staff. In later editions of *Tis Merry*, the division between masculine and feminine consumption becomes even less clear, since revisions to the pamphlet frame women as both producers and consumers of oral and written texts, including the text of *Tis Merry* itself. The quantity and variety of printed books, like other commodities, increased rapidly during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and writers and stationers were constantly searching for new markets.²¹ The same period saw an increase in books by women and books that targeted a female audience, suggesting that the “book trade, eager for new markets, responded increasingly to the tastes and interests of women.”²² Over the course of *Tis Merry*’s eight seventeenth-century editions, the pamphlet’s paratext and main text were altered multiple times as the pamphlet changed hands among five publishers.²³ Examining the print history of this pamphlet sheds additional light on its depiction of gendered consumption and on its own status as a commodity designed (and redesigned) to appeal to a broadening range of reader-consumers that included women.

20. Halasz, *Marketplace of Print*, 173.

21. Adam Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England, 1500–1700* (Oxford, 2000), 14–16; Suzanne W. Hull, *Chaste, Silent & Obedient: English Books for Women, 1475–1640* (San Marino, Calif., 1982), 1, 13.

22. Hull, *Chaste, Silent & Obedient*, 9, 6–13; Lynette McGrath, *Subjectivity and Women’s Poetry in Early Modern England: “Why on the ridge should she desire to go?”* (Aldershot, U.K., 2002), 80–81. As has been frequently noted, attempts to quantify early modern literacy by determining the number of people who could sign their names on official documents tends to underrepresent the amount of people who could read during this period, since reading was taught earlier than and separately from writing; see Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England*, 17–19; and Tessa Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety, 1550–1640* (Cambridge, 1991), 7. Even nonreaders could be indirect consumers of printed texts through the common practice of reading aloud; see Caroline Lucas, *Writing for Women: The Example of Woman as Reader in Elizabethan Romance* (Milton Keynes, U.K., 1989), 13; Watt, *Cheap Print*, 7–8; and Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England*, 36–50. Although early modern women’s literacy is difficult to measure, evidence suggests that it “increased slowly and somewhat erratically” in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries before spiking more dramatically between 1640 and 1690; see McGrath, *Subjectivity and Women’s Poetry*, 80.

23. It was not unheard of for small books and pamphlets such as *Tis Merry* to see significant alterations in their main texts or paratexts, particularly when they went into multiple editions or were acquired by different publishers. For example, Rowlands’s *A Whole Crew of Kind Gossips, All Met to be Merry* was published three times between 1609 and 1663 (once with *Tis Merry*, twice on its own), during which time its prefatory material was altered, its main text rearranged, and new material added to the end. The anonymous *Batchelars Banquet*, a satire of women that was published at least six times between 1603 and 1677, saw the addition of an elaborate title-page woodcut and a prefatory poem in 1631; the title page also received new woodcuts in 1651 and 1671. However, these kinds of changes were not necessarily standard practice. Rowlands’s satiric *Democritus, or Doctor Merry-Man his Medicines, against Melancholy Humors* was published at least twelve times between 1607 and 1681, but it saw few

☞ A Pamphlet's Progress: Revisions to *Tis Merry*

Given the emphasis placed on *Tis Merry*'s prefatory matter by critics, it is crucial to note that three of the four pieces included in the original 1602 edition (including the oft-noted "Conference betweene a Gentleman and a Prentice") are exclusive to that edition. When the pamphlet was published in 1609 and in 1613(?), all the original prefatory material was dropped except for the last piece, "In commendation of this Booke."²⁴ The fourth edition (1619) drops the original prefatory matter entirely, and none of the pieces from the first edition appears in any edition after 1619. Instead, women come to dominate the pamphlet both visually and verbally. Beginning in 1619, a new address titled "By your leave Readers" takes the place of the original prefatory material.²⁵ This piece is signed by the Wife, Widow, and Maid themselves, and in it they speak in the first-person plural. Whereas the first three editions of *Tis Merry* were signed with Rowlands's initials, beginning in 1619, the initials were dropped.²⁶ As a result, the only attribution that appears in the pamphlet is in the signatures of the Widow, Wife, and Maid. This switch in the prefatory matter from a predominantly male perspective to a predominantly female one means that the voices of the three women in the main text are no longer competing with masculine voices in the paratext. Moreover, whereas the first and second editions include only a printer's ornament on the title page, all subsequent editions feature an illustration showing the Widow, Wife, and Maid stylishly dressed in hats and ruffs, eating and drinking around a table with a boy musician attending them.²⁷ This fiddler's boy, who is added as a character in

major changes to either its main text or its paratext after the second edition of 1609. While I find *Tis Merry* to be an interesting case study of how an early modern book could be repositioned within the print market over the course of its publication industry, it is of course not unique in receiving such treatment. For a sustained study of the paratextual history of a very different kind of book, see *Thomas More's "Utopia" in Early Modern Europe: Paratexts and Contexts*, ed. Terence Cave (Manchester, 2012).

24. The 1609 printing is unique in combining *Tis Merry* with Rowlands's other gossip pamphlet, *A Whole Crew of Kind Gossips, All Met to Be Merry*. The two pamphlets were printed on continuous signatures with continuous running heads; they have identical imprints but separate title pages. *Whole Crew* appears first, followed by *Tis Merry*. The only surviving copy of the third edition is an incomplete version owned by the Folger Library. The title page is damaged and the publication date is cut off. The online English Short Title Catalogue provides a conjectural publication date of 1613.

25. Since Rowlands died around 1630, and "By your leave Readers" first appeared in the 1619 edition of *Tis Merry*, it is possible that he composed the new address. John Deane, the publisher of the 1619 edition, published several books by Rowlands between 1607 and 1620 (some new, some previously published), so it would not be surprising if he had procured new material from Rowlands in the course of their other dealings. "By your leave Readers" is written in heroic couplets rather than in the six-line stanzas that characterize the body of *Tis Merry* as well as two of the original prefatory pieces. Although the six-line stanza was a hallmark of Rowlands's, he did sometimes use other styles. *A Whole Crew of Kind Gossips*, for example, is written in heroic couplets.

26. In the 1602 edition, Rowlands's initials appear after the address to gentlemen readers and at the end of the pamphlet. In the 1609 edition, which was published in combination with *Whole Crew*, Rowlands's initials appear at the beginning of *Whole Crew* but not at all in the *Tis Merry* section. In the 1613(?) edition, Rowlands's initials again appear at the end of the pamphlet. Rowlands's full name does not appear in any edition.

27. As O'Malley notes, the 1627 version of the woodcut alters the women's clothing and hats to reflect changing styles; "Custome," 23.

the 1613(?) edition, occupies a position of subservience to his female customers; he is placed lower in the frame of the image compared to the women, and he was drawn smaller and smaller in proportion to the women when the woodcut was remade in 1627 and again in 1673.²⁸ Thus, rather than being bounded and interpreted by male voices, in later editions the dialogue is framed and claimed by the images and voices of the women themselves.

In the new address to readers, the Widow, Wife, and Maid defend their tavern meeting and assert their place as active subjects not only in the marketplace of food and drink but also in the marketplace of print. The address begins with a complaint about how the women have been satirically (and possibly sexually) exploited by having their tavern meeting published and publicized: “we are fall’n into the Printers hands / And have before this time been often prest, / To make our private meeting, publicke jest” (48). Initially, the new address seems to play into the stereotypes of sexual commodification depicted in the “Conference betweene a Gentleman and a Prentice.” The women are helpless in the hands of the printers, and the sexual pun on “press” implies that with each new print run, the women are transformed into erotic commodities for a new crop of male readers. However, after these complaints the women move to emphasizing their own consumer pleasures, which they defend by appealing both to their good manners and to their status as paying customers: “Merry wee were, yet free from all offence, / And there was no man charg’d with our expence; / Unto a penny wee our reckning payd” (48). The women then point out the double standard that allows men to keep their own consumption private, while making the women’s inoffensive meetings the subject of “publicke jest”:

Men can their owne carowsings closely smother,
 Their Pottles and their Gallons, hand to hand,
 Their drinking Healthes until they cannot stand:
 And yet there is no Bookes in Rime to show it[.]
 (48)

As when the Widow accuses certain types of men of being sexually insatiable, here men are again depicted as unruly overconsumers who in their wild “carowsings” consume alcohol by “pottles” [half-gallons] and “gallons” until they are literally fall-down drunk. The women’s own drinking appears moderate by contrast; at the end of the narrative, the Widow, Wife, and Maid are at least upright when they leave the tavern. To combat this double standard, the women threaten to make men’s overconsumption the subject of satiric “Bookes in Rime”: “weele have a Wench shall be our Poet, / And pay [men] home, because they doe provoke” (48). The women further usurp the roles of author and publisher by claiming responsibility for *Tis Merry’s* content and defending it against potentially hostile readers: “So pray reade on, wee stand to all wee spoke” (48). Rather than retreat from the marketplace of print, in which they claim to have been

28. Ibid.

exploited, the women plan to fight male satirists on their own turf by publishing books and taking ownership of the pamphlet in which they appear.

Moreover, additions to the main text of *Tis Merry* promote women's status as textual consumers. The title page of the 1613(?) edition advertises it as revised and expanded, presumably to entice readers who may already be familiar with earlier versions of the pamphlet: "Newly Enlarged, With divers merry Songes, sung by a Fidlers Boy."²⁹ One addition is a scene in which some fiddlers interrupt the women's party, and the women pay to hear the youngest member of the group sing two ballads. As with their food and drink, the women are choosy consumers; the Widow demands that the song be sung "quickly," and the Wife asks, "Let it touch men I pray." The boy musician complies with his customers' requests by singing a short song that critiques male infidelity. In keeping with the women's discussions of courtship and marriage, the song employs the vocabulary of commerce to describe "double dealing" men who will love a woman only "till the sport be spent" (54). Women are therefore advised to heed the dictates of supply and demand: "For to be in great request, / Make your love exceeding strange" (55). In its language of dealing, spending, scarcity, and value, the boy's song echoes the women's own conversation about how to be a successful player on the marriage market.

The women reward the boy for his song by buying him a drink, and the Wife says she would like to hear "such another" song, but one "that is new." Like the Prentice in "A Conference," the fiddler's boy is quick to give his customer what she wants, and the song he offers seems custom-made for this audience: "Yes, I have one is call'd, *The Maydes bad choyce*: / Pen'd by a Mayde her selfe, whose constant truth / Was lately wronged by a Merchants Youth." This song is carefully framed as a commodity produced by a woman for women; not only was it "Pen'd by a Mayde," but the first line of the song explicitly addresses "London Maides" (55). Like the first song, the second complains of men's cruelty and faithlessness, but whereas the narrator of the first is gender-neutral, the second is sung in the first-person voice of a young woman who is seduced, impregnated, and abandoned. The title of the song (*The Maydes bad choyce*) once again emphasizes the serious consequences of women's choices during courtship and depicts women as participants in a sexual marketplace—it seems no coincidence that the young man who cheats and deceives the naïve virgin is "a Merchants Youth." The boy's song echoes the Wife's and Widow's advice to the Maid not to succumb to a young man's declarations of love without first testing his sincerity, and the Wife emphasizes the song's practical implications for her young friend: "tis good warning wench for you; take heed." As the song's target audience, the Maid is particularly appreciative; it is she who pays the singer six pence for the entertainment (57). Just as the tavern workers cater to the women's food and drink preferences, the availability of musical texts designed to appeal to female tastes indicates respect and accommodation for women's purchasing power. Moreover, changes to later editions appear to

29. Although all subsequent editions claim to be "newly enlarged," none of the editions after 1619 contains new material.

shape *Tis Merry* itself, like the ballads it contains, into a commodity aimed at women readers.³⁰

Unlike the first edition's prefatory material, the new prefatory poem does not address gendered categories of readers. However, changes to the title page do suggest a potential audience of women for the pamphlet. The main title of the first three editions is *Tis Merry when Gossips meete*, but beginning in 1619, the title is expanded to *Well met Gossip: or, Tis merrie when Gossips meete*. The title shifts from an observation (*Tis Merry when Gossips meete*) to include a greeting (*Well met Gossip*), and this change calls into question who is speaking and who is being greeted. Is this an imagined bit of dialogue, with one of the gossips from the pamphlet greeting another? Is an authorial voice addressing the women in the pamphlet? Or is the feminized pamphlet itself greeting potential readers as gossips, hailing purchasers of the book as kindred spirits? In this latter interpretation, women would be the direct recipients of the title's greeting, and men would have to imagine themselves as gossips (or at least sympathize with them) in order to be included as ideal readers. Beginning with the sixth edition (1656), the title was further expanded to more explicitly target female customers by promoting the pamphlet as "pleasant for Maids, Wives, and Widdows; and delightfull to all that shall read it." Although the title hedges its bets by claiming the pamphlet is "delightfull to all," the readers it identifies first and specifically are women exactly like those who appear as characters in the pamphlet itself.

In the first edition of *Tis Merry*, the Gentleman pays the Prentice six pence for the pamphlet and, by extension, the women it contains. In the revised pamphlet, this scene of purchase is replaced by one in which the women themselves pay a young salesman six pence for ballads. Although neither of the boy's ballads appears in the pamphlet as a printed broadsheet, the second ballad is described as having originated as a written text; the singer claims it was "*Pen'd* by a *Mayde*" (my emphasis).³¹ This ballad's female authorship evokes the women's vow in the new prefatory poem to "have a *Wench* . . . be our *Poet*" in order to produce books criticizing men (48). Both the poem and the added scene with the musicians flirt with the notion of women as producers and consumers of print culture, even though the *Widow*, *Wife*, and *Maid* never purchase printed texts like the Gentleman does. Instead, they are consumers of songs, drinks, and food—all feminized, "ephemeral pleasures" that, according to Halasz, do

30. Hull included the first edition of *Tis Merry* in her catalogue of early books meant to appeal to a female audience primarily on the basis of its address to London gentlewomen (*Chaste, Silent & Obedient*, 200). Newcomb argues that this piece does not constitute a sincere "appeal to women readers" but instead "invites the reader, already constructed as male, to look at an epistle that addresses women as men imagine them" (*Reading Popular Romance*, 288n57). I would argue that later editions of the pamphlet, in which the original prefatory matter was dropped, seem to target women readers more deliberately.

31. During the early modern period, songs and ballads like the ones the boy sings sat at the intersection of oral and print culture. Sellers of printed ballads would sing selections from their stock to attract customers, and musicians like the ones patronized by the *Widow*, *Wife*, and *Maid* often carried written or printed copies of their music with them. Ballads from oral tradition found their way into print, and printed ballads formed part of the repertoire of minstrels; see Watt, *Cheap Print*, 14–30.

not possess the lasting value of print commodities. Nevertheless, the publication history of *Tis Merry* belies the dichotomy between male and female consumption that Halasz identifies in the original prefatory matter, since the pamphlet itself is a print commodity that increasingly courts a female audience in its later editions. Considering *Tis Merry*'s publishers can shed light on how this pamphlet and its audiences may have been conceived at different moments in its publication history.

~ *Tis Merry*'s Publishers and Their Specializations

As Zachary Lesser argues, an early modern publisher, when deciding whether to invest in a book, "had to understand the book, using his or her critical skills to judge the book's potential appeal and possible consumers."³² Publishers paid for the manufacture of books and profited if their titles sold well; this financial stake meant that they had the most to gain from understanding what kinds of books appealed to different audiences.³³ Because publishers tended to specialize, we can gain insight into how a publisher interpreted a particular text and imagined potential buyers by examining the other books in that publisher's stock.³⁴ *Tis Merry* was issued by five publishers in eight editions over the course of more than seventy years; its publishers seem to have had different motives for investing in it and positioned it to appeal to different audiences. As I will demonstrate, it appears that *Tis Merry*'s later publishers invested in the pamphlet in part because of its potential appeal to female customers.

Tis Merry's first publisher was W. White, and White's interest in the pamphlet can best be understood in the context of his earlier publication of another work by Samuel Rowlands, *The Letting of Humours Blood in the Head-Vaine* (1600). *Humours Blood*, a collection of short, satirical poems, had allusions that were so offensive that it was ordered burned in the Stationers' Company kitchen on October 26, 1600.³⁵ Despite this rebuke, *Humours Blood* was reprinted, and on March 4, 1601, the Stationers' Register notes payments from twenty-nine stationers who were fined two shillings and six pence each "for their Disorders in buyinge of the bookes of *humours lettinge blood in the vayne* beinge newe printed after yt was first forbydden and burnt." The scandalous satire was a hit despite (or perhaps because of) attempts to censor it, and between 1600 and 1613 it appeared in at least seven editions under various titles.³⁶ On September 15, 1602, *Tis Merry* was entered to White in the Stationers' Register, and it seems likely that White was hoping to reproduce his success with *Humours Blood* by publishing another satire by Rowlands, albeit one that played it safer by focusing on broad female character types rather than allusions to specific individuals.

32. Zachary Lesser, *Renaissance Drama and the Politics of Publication* (Cambridge, 2004), 35.

33. I am using the term "publisher" as it is defined by Lesser: "the person who pays to have a book produced and reaps the rewards—or suffers the losses—of this investment"; *ibid.*, 27. See also Peter Blayney, "The Publication of Playbooks," in *A New History of Early English Drama*, ed. John D. Cox and David Scott Kastan (New York, 1997), 391.

34. Lesser, *Renaissance Drama*, 8.

35. O'Malley, "Custome," 20.

36. Rowlands, *Complete Works*, 11–12.

Tis Merry's satiric appeal was probably also the source of its attraction for its next publisher, John Deane, who was responsible for the 1609, 1613(?), and 1619 editions. Like White, Deane had prior experience publishing humorous books by Rowlands; he published Rowlands's *Democritus, or Doctor Merry-Man his Medicines, against Melancholy Humors* in 1607 and again in 1609, the same year that he published *Tis Merry* in a double edition with Rowlands's other gossip pamphlet, *A Whole Crew of Kind Gossips, All Met to be Merry*.³⁷ In 1608, Deane published Robert Armin's *A Nest of Ninnies*, another addition to his catalogue of jestbooks and satires. In 1613, he brought out both *Whole Crew* and *Tis Merry* as separate books, and he followed his 1619 edition of *Tis Merry* with another Rowlands satire, *The Night-Raven* (1620). The imagined readership for the jestbooks and satires with which the first four editions of *Tis Merry* kept company tends to skew male. *Humours Blood's* prefatory poems address "Gentlemen Readers" and "Poets," *Doctor Merry-Man* addresses "Honest Gentle-men," and *Nest of Ninnies* is dedicated to "the generous Gentlemen of Oxenford, Cambridge, and the Innes of Court."³⁸ Given that other satires published by White and Deane appear to be marketed specifically to men, it is possible that these publishers viewed *Tis Merry* as a commodity that would appeal most strongly to customers like the gentleman book-buyer in "A Conference." While male readers may indeed have found the pamphlet's depiction of women humorous and titillating, *Tis Merry* may also have had meanings and audiences that exceeded those imagined by its first two publishers.

As Pamela Allen Brown argues, the meaning of gossip literature like *Tis Merry* is "diffuse and cannot be restricted entirely to . . . normative masculinist satire."³⁹ Certainly the representations of the Maid, Widow, and Wife can be read as satiric, but the women are themselves story- and joke-tellers who make both men and women the subject of their jests. At least one early modern reader appears to have found the pamphlet to be a source of jibes about men as well as women. In October 1602, law student John Manningham copied several witty passages from *Tis Merry* into his diary, including jokes targeting falsely coy virgins ("Maydes take fewe thinges to which they say not nay") and wives who cuckold their husbands ("Taurus soe rules and guides your husbands head, / That every night they sleep in hornework cap"). In addition to this fairly conventional misogynist stock, however, Manningham recorded the Widow's scathing

37. Beginning in 1609, the title of *Democritus, or Doctor Merry-Man* was changed to *Doctor Merrie-Man: or, Nothing but Mirth*.

38. Rowlands, *The Letting of Humours Blood in the Head-Vaine* (London, 1600), A2, A3; Rowlands, *Democritus, or Doctor Merry-Man his Medicines, against Melancholy Humors* (London, 1607), A3; Robert Armin, *A Nest of Ninnies, Simply of Themselves Without Compound* (London, 1608), A2. *Whole Crew* features a prefatory epistle "To the Maids of London," which asks unmarried women readers to "observe" and "judge" the six wives who meet in a tavern to drink and complain about their husbands; although it addresses women readers, the epistle's sympathies clearly lie with the "good harmlesse men" whom the gossips "abuse"; see Rowlands, *A whole crew of kind Gossips*, in "Custome Is an Idiot," ed. O'Malley, 68. *The Night-Raven* contains no prefatory material.

39. Pamela Allen Brown, *Better a Shrew than a Sheep: Women, Drama, and the Culture of Jest in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2003), 60.

depiction of a bald man “Whose forefront looks like jack an Apes behind.”⁴⁰ Clearly, Manningham picked up on the pamphlet’s satirization of women, but he also enjoyed the three women’s satirization of men. If a male reader like Manningham could appreciate the dual nature of the pamphlet’s satire, it seems very likely that women readers could do the same, particularly since changes introduced in the editions published by Deane privilege women’s perspectives by erasing male voices from the paratext, adding material “authored” by women, and inserting ballads that explicitly sympathize with women’s experiences. Thus, while White and Deane may have imagined a primarily male readership for *Tis Merry*, the changes made when Deane was publisher also could have increased its appeal to women.

It is more difficult to determine how *Tis Merry*’s third publisher understood the pamphlet and its potential audiences, in part because the identity of the publisher of the 1627 edition is unclear. According to the imprint, this edition was printed by Augustine Mathewes and sold wholesale by Michael Sparke, but in the absence of a licensing entry in the Stationers’ Register, it is uncertain which of these men was the publisher.⁴¹ We can be fairly certain that Sparke had a financial stake in the pamphlet. Even if he was not the publisher, as wholesaler he would have either purchased copies from the publisher to sell, or he would have sold for the publisher on consignment; the printer, by contrast, would be paid for producing the books whether they sold or not.⁴² Moreover, as a wholesaler, Sparke may have had more control over his stock than a retail bookseller or a printer.⁴³ Sparke’s willingness to invest in something as ribald as *Tis Merry* might seem out of character, since he is usually remembered as the Puritan

40. *The Diary of John Manningham of the Middle Temple, 1602–1603*, ed. Robert Parker Sorlien (Hanover, N.H., 1976), 98–99.

41. Only the first edition of *Tis Merry* is entered in the Stationers’ Register, although the imprints of later editions indicate that ownership of the pamphlet changed hands. As M. A. Shaaber notes, books were often transferred among stationers on the basis of private contracts that were not recorded in the Stationers’ Register; see “The Meaning of the Imprint in Early Printed Books,” *The Library*, 4th ser., 24 (1943–44): 124–25. Mathewes could have been a printer-publisher who hired booksellers to wholesale his merchandise, or Sparke could have been a bookseller who hired printers like Mathewes to produce the books he published. It is also possible that the two men collaborated financially to copublish *Tis Merry* or that a third-party publisher hired Mathewes to print the pamphlet and Sparke to wholesale it. On the interpretation of this type of imprint, see Lesser, *Renaissance Drama*, 29n13; and Shaaber, “The Meaning of the Imprint,” 132–34. A search of the online English Short Title Catalogue for imprints containing Mathewes’s name reveals that, in the approximately 120 imprints containing his name between 1620 and 1637, he appears most often as the printer of books that were published and sold by others. A search for imprints containing Sparke’s name reveals the opposite: in the approximately 170 imprints containing his name between 1624 and 1653, he appears most often as the publisher of books that were printed by others. It thus seems reasonable to speculate that Sparke was most likely the publisher of the 1627 *Tis Merry*, but it is impossible to know for certain without a Stationers’ Register entry.

42. Lesser, *Renaissance Drama*, 94n48, 95n52, 37.

43. Adrian Johns notes that “in his warehouse, the wholesaling Stationer could . . . maintain a stock of books the contents of which he had himself vetted”; *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (Chicago, 1998), 151.

publisher of William Prynne's godly books.⁴⁴ However, Sparke's investment in *Tis Merry* may have served as an initial foray into publishing books for women.

In the 1630s, Sparke published three books targeting upper-class women readers (or at least those with upper-class pretensions). In 1631 he published Richard Brathwaite's *The English Gentlewoman*, a conduct book for women containing prefatory material addressed to Arbella Wentworth and "The Gentlewoman Reader."⁴⁵ In the same year he also published John Kennedy's *The Ladies Delight, or: The English Gentlewomans History of Calanthrop and Lucilla*, which had first been published in Edinburgh in 1626 as *The Historie of Calanthrop and Lucilla*. Although the 1631 edition contains no prefatory material addressed to women, the change in title clearly indicates an attempt to market Kennedy's verse romance to a female audience. In 1636, Sparke published *Ovid's Heroicall Epistles*, a collection of verse letters in which women from Greek mythology address their lovers. This book contains both prose and verse prefatory pieces addressed "To the Vertuous Ladies and Gentlewomen," and letters such as "Penelope to Ulysses" and "Dido to Aeneas" give voice to "the complaint of Ladies and Gentlewomen, for the absence of their Lovers."⁴⁶ While the tone of the books Sparke published in the 1630s is more decorous and elevated than that of the lively and earthy *Tis Merry*, all four books share a focus on love, courtship, desire, and the examination of women's emotions, behavior, and social education. Even if Sparke did not initially invest in *Tis Merry* because he considered it a commodity for women, it may have served as an example when he began to publish books for women readers more systematically in the 1630s.

When William Gilbertson published the next edition in 1656, he explicitly established *Tis Merry's* appeal to female customers in the expanded title's claim that the pamphlet is "pleasant for Maids, Wives, and Widdows." Here again, the publisher's specializations are significant in understanding the assumptions about potential readers that the title change reflects. From around 1655 to 1665, Gilbertson was part of a group of publishers that "dominated the ballad trade in the latter half of the seventeenth century"; in addition to his collaborations with this group, he published many books and ballads on his own.⁴⁷ Gilbertson's professional interest in ballads is significant, given *Tis Merry's* prominent portrayal of a ballad singer in later editions, and like the pamphlet and the songs it contains, some of the ballads Gilbertson published feature the voices and perspectives of women. In *A New Merry Dialogue betweene John and Bessee* (1655?), John tries to persuade the reluctant Besse to marry him; the first part of the ballad is written in John's voice, and the second half is Besse's reply. Similarly,

44. Lesser, *Renaissance Drama*, 40–41; Johns, *Nature of the Book*, 52, 139–40, 158, 185; Dagmar Freist, *Governed by Opinion: Politics, Religion, and the Dynamics of Communication in Stuart London, 1637–1645* (New York, 1997), 89, 91.

45. Richard Brathwaite, *The English Gentlewoman, Drawne Out to the Full Body* (London, 1631), ¶3, ¶¶3.

46. *Ovid's Heroicall Epistles* (London, 1636), A3, A5, 1, 40, A4.

47. Cyprian Blagden, "Notes on the Ballad Market in the Second Half of the Seventeenth Century," *Studies in Bibliography* 6 (1954): 161, 162.

The Two Jeering Lovers (1656) features the repartee of “Dick Down-right of the country” and “pretty witty Nancy of the citie.” In *The Young-Womans Complaint* (1655–60), a female speaker addresses an imagined audience of “young damsels,” urging them to learn from her mistake in marrying a much older man: “Be sure to be wise in / your choice of Marriage.” These ballads, all published by Gilbertson during the mid- to late 1650s, share *Tis Merry*’s emphasis on women’s concerns and opinions regarding courtship and marriage and on the importance of choosing a husband wisely. Moreover, Gilbertson’s edition of *Tis Merry* is the only edition to be set in black-letter type. By using the typeface most common to broadside ballads, this edition expands on its thematic links to ballads by evoking them visually.⁴⁸

Thomas Vere, who published the last two editions of *Tis Merry* in 1673 and 1675, was from 1655 to 1682 a member of the same group of partners that included Gilbertson.⁴⁹ During the 1670s Vere collaborated in the publication of numerous broadside ballads. While some of these ballads critique unruly women—such as *My Wife will be My Master* (1674–79) and *She is Bound but Won’t Obey* (1674–79)—many give voice to women’s complaints about men. Ballads such as *The Young Ladies Complaint* (1674–79), *The Distressed Damsels Downfall* (1674–79), *Repentance too Late* (1678–81), and *The Distressed Virgin* (1678–81) all feature young women speakers who, like the woman in *The Maydes bad choyce*, have been seduced, deceived, and abandoned by duplicitous men. Like ballads published by Gilbertson, many of Vere’s ballads resemble *Tis Merry* in their privileging of female voices and their sympathy with women’s points of view.

Tessa Watt notes that “the ubiquity of the ballad” prevents us from assuming that gender, class, or geography would have limited the audience for broadsides, but it is also true that during the early modern period, ballads were often associated with women in the popular imagination.⁵⁰ Within oral culture, women were “the special guardians of old tales, proverbs, songs, poems and ballads,” and seventeenth-century commentators such as John Earle and Richard Brathwaite wrote derisively of the “country wench” and “poore milke maid” who learned the songs chanted by itinerant ballad-sellers.⁵¹ In Shakespeare’s *Winter’s Tale* the shepherdesses Mopsa and Dorcas clamor for the ballads in Autolycus’s pack, eager not just to hear the songs but also to purchase the printed broadsheets: “I love a ballad in print alife, for then we are sure they are true” (4.4.459–60). Satiric portrayals of women hearing, singing, and purchasing ballads reveal anxiety over their wide circulation, which was made possible by publishers like Gilbertson and Vere who combined resources in order to produce ballads

48. Gerald Egan, “Black Letter and the Broadside Ballad,” English Broadside Ballad Archive, University of California, Santa Barbara, <http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/page/black-letter>.

49. Blagden, “Notes on the Ballad Market,” 162.

50. Watt, *Cheap Print*, 12; Sandra Clark, “The Broadside Ballad and the Woman’s Voice,” in *Debating Gender in Early Modern England*, ed. Malcolmson and Suzuki, 103.

51. Jacqueline Pearson, “Women Reading, Reading Women,” in *Women and Literature in Britain, 1500–1700*, ed. Helen Wilcox (Cambridge, 1998), 81. See John Earle, *Microcosmographie* (London, 1628), 1E10r–v; and Brathwaite, *Whimzies: or, A New Cast of Characters* (London, 1631), B4v.

in mass quantities and distribute them widely through systems of peddlers.⁵² While “the persistent association of ballads with women” does not mean that women were their only readers, the fact that women were so closely linked to the ubiquity of ballads indicates that publishers would likely have considered them a significant potential audience and may have acquired texts in order to appeal to them.⁵³ As Sandra Clark points out, seventeenth-century ballads were increasingly addressed to “target audiences, which frequently included women,” as opposed to earlier ballads that were typically “formulated toward a collective audience.”⁵⁴

In addition to their stock of ballads, seventeenth-century ballad publishers invested heavily in “small books” that were “cheap, portable and suitable for the rudimentary reader.” Such books could be carried long distances by peddlers and therefore reached the same audiences as ballads.⁵⁵ As a short, relatively cheap quarto volume, *Tis Merry* would have been exactly the type of “small book” that, by the late seventeenth century, “had become numerically more important than broadsides in the output of the . . . ballad publishers.”⁵⁶ As with ballads, the publishers probably imagined that the audience for some of these books was partially, or even predominantly, female. Gilbertson published three editions of *Ovid’s Heroicall Epistles* (1653, 1656, 1663), which, as discussed above, explicitly addresses women readers in its prefatory matter. In 1672, Vere published two short romances in octavo: *Fortunes Tennis-Ball: or, The Most Excellent History of Dorastus and Fawnia*, and *The Most Excellent History of Argalus and Parthenia*. As with ballads, commentators persistently associated romances with women readers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and while Lori Humphrey Newcomb reminds us that such commentary “over-represented the presence of women among [romance] readership,” such popular ideas about the tastes of women readers, whether accurate or not, would have influenced publishers’ choices about which books would appeal to certain audiences.⁵⁷ By giving *Tis Merry* a place in the peddler’s pack, Gilbertson and Vere signaled their assumption that it would appeal to the same customers who would purchase the ballads and romances traveling with it—customers who, at least in the publishers’ minds, would likely have included women.

While the first edition of *Tis Merry* emphasized the perspective of the upper-class male reader, eavesdropping on the salacious conversation of the Wife, Widow, and Maid, changes to the text allowed women’s voices to dominate, making it difficult

52. Tessa Watt, “Publisher, Pedlar, Pot-Poet: The Changing Character of the Broadside Trade, 1550–1640,” in *Spreading the Word: The Distribution Networks of Print, 1550–1850*, ed. Robin Myers and Michael Harris (Winchester, U.K., 1990), 65–72.

53. Bruce R. Smith, “Female Impersonation in Early Modern Ballads,” in *Women Players in England, 1500–1660: Beyond the All-Male Stage*, ed. Pamela Allen Brown and Peter Parolin (Aldershot, U.K., 2005), 297.

54. Clark, “The Broadside Ballad,” 116, 104.

55. Watt, “Publisher,” 68.

56. *Ibid.*, 74–75.

57. Newcomb, *Reading Popular Romance*, 37–47, 104–17; Lucas, *Writing for Women*, 15–18; Pearson, “Women Reading, Reading Women,” 91–93.

to predict what types of identifications and sympathies readers might adopt. Just as ballads allowed for multiple acts of impersonation and identification involving the singer, the audience, and the narrative voice,⁵⁸ so might the first-person nature of the dialogue in *Tis Merry* have made it just as likely for readers to laugh *with* the women as to laugh *at* them. The Widow, Wife, and Maid appreciate and identify with the ballads they hear despite the fact that a boy sings them, and readers of both genders might similarly have identified and sympathized with the women in *Tis Merry* regardless of its (increasingly obscured) male authorship. Indeed, changes and additions to the pamphlet broadened its appeal to women readers, who as textual consumers themselves may have been more disposed to approve of the sexual, material, and cultural consumption in which the Widow, Wife, and Maid engage. Although the women in the pamphlet express anxiety about talking and drinking “like men” (33), the scenes of female consumption depicted in *Tis Merry* and the publication history of the pamphlet itself suggest that women were able and at times encouraged to take an active part in the economic sphere, including the marketplace of print.

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58. Smith, “Female Impersonation,” 281–301; Paxton Hehmeyer, “The Social Function of the Broadside Ballad; or, a New Medley of Readers,” English Broadside Ballad Archive, University of California, Santa Barbara, <http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/page/social-function-of-the-ballad>.