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The Sporty Bedlam, Idle Housewives, and the Gender Politics of Dirt in *Gammer Gurton's Needle*

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An early modern English proverb says, "A clean-fingered housewife and an idle."[1] While this proverb tells us about the nastiness of the housewife's work, it also reveals her ambivalent relationship with dirt, the cleaning of which is part and parcel of her daily work. Although contemporary household manual writers such as Gervase Markham advise the housewife to "be cleanly both in body and garments," her cleanliness could render her suspicious not only of "too much niceness"[2] but also, as the proverb points out, of idleness. At the same time, if she tries to eschew the accusation by plunging herself into her work without worrying about defiling herself, her dirtiness nonetheless threatens to conflate her with the very waste matter that she seeks to dispel and, as a result, could incur the suspicion of idleness as well. As dirt can either become the proof of a housewife's diligence and hence her virtue, or be used as an excuse to condemn her deviation from the ideal gender role, so her dirtiness can make her either a guardian of order and cleanliness, or a culprit of pollution and chaos at home. In *Gammer Gurton's Needle* (c. 1560), such ambiguity further serves to conflate the housewives with the vagrant, displacing the anxiety about vagrancy onto the former, who are held responsible for the filth and disorder that lie not just inside but also outside the door.

If the early modern housewife risks sullying her body because of her work, the vagrant is conflated with "dirt, pollution and peril"[3] because, unemployed and deprived, he is compelled to live a rootless and potentially disorderly life. As A.

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1 Morris Palmer Tilley, *A Dictionary of the Proverbs in England in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1950), H798.

2 Gervase Markham, *The English Housewife*, ed. Michael R. Best (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998), p. 64.

3 Paul Slack, *Poverty and Policy in Tudor and Stuart England* (London: Longman, 1988), p. 24.

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L. Beier writes in *Masterless Men*, "for the dominant class, vagabonds appeared to threaten the established order" both because they were "'masterless' in a period when the able-bodied poor were supposed to have masters," and because they "broke with official conventions of family, economic, religious and political life."[4] As the problem of vagrancy worsened with growing poverty, it further gave rise to the popularity of rogue literature. More than confirming the received theory of vagrancy, the literature elaborated and propagated the stigmatization of vagabonds, portraying them as despicable and immoral criminals, and showing them as endangering respectable society and the state.[5] As one of the most pressing social problems, vagrancy was hardly something that contemporaries could laugh about.

Given the negative perception of vagrants, the comic representation of bedlam Diccon in *Gammer Gurton's Needle* seems far from typical. Although the bedlam originally referred to the inmate of the Hospital of St. Mary of Bethlehem in London, a hospital founded for the care of the mentally ill, the term gradually came to be employed to refer to beggars and vagrants as well. As unpredictable and uncontrollable in his behavior as a madman, Diccon also fits perfectly into the early modern stereotype of the vagrant.[6] Able-bodied, he nonetheless leads an idle, disorderly life, wandering over the country (1.1.6)[7] and falling into trespassing and stealing whenever an opportunity (1.1.24) arises. He also disrupts the order and harmony in the village by fabricating information about the whereabouts of the needle. Although early modern treatments of vagrants were in general harsh,[8] he receives no discrimination for his idleness and certainly no severe punishment for the trouble he makes, which instead is treated as a "sport" (5.2.196). In the end, he even gets the credit for recovering Gammer Gurton's needle and bringing about the order and harmony in the village.

As the play downplays the negative implications of Diccon as a bedlam,

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[4] A. L. Beier, *Masterless Men: The Vagrancy Problem in England, 1560-1640* (London: Methuen, 1985), p. xix.

[5] Beier, pp. 7-8.

[6] See, for example, Thomas Harman's description of the abram-man in *A Caveat or Warning for Common Cursitors* in *The Elizabethan Underworld*, ed. A. V. Judges (London: George Routledge & Sons, Ltd., 1930), pp. 83-84 According to him, the abram-men are "those that feign themselves to have been mad, and have been kept either in Bethlem or in some other prison a good time"; they would "pick and steal" and are able "to deceive and abuse the wisest man that is," p. 83.

[7] All citations to *Gammer Gurton's Needle* will be cited parenthetically in the text.

[8] As Beier illustrates, contemporary state policies toward vagrants, on the one hand, focused on retributive punishments, including corporal punishments such as hanging, whipping, and branding, and deprivation of freedom such as compulsory labor, impressment, and transportation. On the other hand, they also sought to imprison vagrants in bridewells or houses of correction for reformative purposes, but penal elements were still heavily employed as means of reformation, pp. 158-169.

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so critics replicate this tendency. While J. W. Robinson insists that "Diccon is not responsible for the situation in the village,"[9] R. W. Ingram sees Diccon as the sustaining force of the play, without which "there would then be a series of wild events and reactions that would have something very much of the theater of the absurd about them."[10] Like Robinson who identifies Diccon as "a revealer of truth" who brings "enlightenment to the village,"[11] Douglas Duncan similarly suggests that Diccon is an "appropriate hero . . . to expose and comment on the follies of others."[12] Whereas critics downplay the problem of vagrancy, they attribute the kind of dirt and disorder associated with vagrants to the villagers, more specifically to Gammer Gurton and Dame Chat,[13] and thereby reinforce contemporary stereotype of woman, especially independent single woman, as the cause of danger and chaos in society.[14]

It is true that husbandless and thus "masterless" in a different sense, the two housewives in the play diverge from the gender order that could model state order. Nevertheless, their potential for disorder has not appeared to be a concern to others, nor has the dirt that abounds in the play become an issue until Diccon decides to "make . . . good sport" (2.2.18) out of Gammer's loss. It is my contention that, while the play displaces anxiety about vagrancy onto the two housewives, such a displacement is facilitated by the conceptual conflation between women and vagrants, a conflation made possible by their common association with dirtiness and idleness. Ostensibly, early modern housewives had a close affinity with cleanliness because they were responsible for purifying their households from every kind of dirt and disorder. Nevertheless, forced by their duty to have direct, frequent contact with waste matter, they risked being polluted by it. Given the repetitive nature of housework,

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9 J. W. Robinson, "The Art and Meaning of *Gammer Gurton's Needle*." *Renaissance Drama* 14 (1983): 48.

10 R. W. Ingram, "*Gammer Gurton's Needle*: Comedy Not Quite of the Lowest Order?" *SEL* 7 (1967):267.

11 Robinson, pp.63-64.

12 Douglas Duncan, "*Gammer Gurton's Needle* and the Concept of Humanist Parody." *SEL* 27 (1987): 186.

13 Duncan, p.179; Robinson, p.59. Similarly, Curtis Perry argues that Gammer is identified with "a figure for unproductive idleness" because women in the play are "scapegoated for the changing household affected by the nascent commodity culture." Nevertheless, he does not explain why Diccon, whose vagrancy "would have resonated with contemporary understandings of the mid-Tudor crisis," is authorized to satirize "the nostalgic sentimentality of conservative reformers" without being stigmatized for his overt idleness. Curtis Perry, "Commodity and Commonwealth in *Gammer Gurton's Needl*e," *SEL* 42 (2002): 222-223, 230-231.

14 As Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford point out, contemporaries not only treated independent single women as anomalies, but also variously referred to them as "vagrants, criminals, or prostitutes." *Women in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 165-166.

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the housewives were also suspected of idleness no matter how diligent they were in their pursuit of cleanliness. From this perspective, the dirt and disorder in *Gammer Gurton's Needle* reflect not so much the two housewives' idleness and incompetence as the repetitiveness and futility that define their daily work. Due to their intimate yet ambivalent relationship with dirt and disorder, they hence become easy targets for suspicion and censure, and are scapegoated for Diccon's errant behavior.

I

In order to fully grasp the implications of the conflation between the housewife and the bedlam, we must first explore the former's ambivalent relationship with dirt in her daily work. Ostensibly, the housewife's contact with dirt was confined to cleaning, which hardly seemed to constitute a significant part of housewifery. Nevertheless, as most housework involves handling waste of one kind or another, so cleaning is indispensable to the fulfillment of other housework. Take cooking as an example. Lorna Weatherill points out that since cleaning could be done whenever and wherever there was a need, it was actually more varied than other kinds of housework, especially cooking.[15] Moreover, as Markham repeatedly reminds his readers in *The English Housewife*, the success of cooking, the "first and most principal"[16] part of housewifery, is contingent on thorough cleaning and washing of both foodstuff and utensils.[17] This helps explain why the heroine Joan in a contemporary ballad ("The Coy Cook-Maid")[18] is praised more for her cleaning than for her cookery:

> Joan scrub'd up her rooms, made all things clean,
> The tables, the chairs, and the edge of the skreen;
> She scour'd each pispot and pewter-dish,
> Made e'ry thing clean as heart could wish;
> The pewter and brass was so very clear
> That, wanting a glass, she oft drew near
> To deck up her head and curle her hair —
> Not one amongst twenty with her could compare. (1-8)

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15 Lorna Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain, 1660-1760* (London: Routledge, 1988), p.151.

16 Markham, p. 60.

17 See also, for example, Markham's instructions of the making of various salads, pp. 64-65. See also his rules of roast meats: "First, the cleanly keeping and scouring of the spits and cob-irons; next, the neat picking and washing of meat before it is spitted," p. 83.

18 "The Coy Cook-Maid," in *The Roxburghe Ballads*, ed. WM. Chappell, F. S. A., vol. 3, pp. 627-630 (Hertford: Stephen Austin and Sons, 1880), l. 1-8, hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

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Although Joan is responsible for cooking, the ballad's praise of her cleanliness both precedes that of her cookery and exceeds the latter in length and detail.[19] Whereas the narrator skims through the making of her "plumb pottage," her "sweet minc'd pies," and her "rost-beef" (9-10), he dwells at length on the process of her cleaning, implying that it is due to her thorough cleaning that her food is "lik'd so well" and that "[n]ot one among twenty could excell" (12). She must clean all the "rooms" related to cooking[20] and make everything as "clean as heart could wish," including objects not directly related to cooking such as "pispot."[21] Trivial though these chores appear, they are necessary for the success of cooking. More importantly, according to Andrew Boorde, the cleanliness of "the buttery, the celler, the kitchen, the larder-howse, with all other howses of offices"[22] is essential to the keeping of health. Cleaning has a great impact not just on the taste of food but also on the consumer's well-being.

Like other kinds of housework, however, cooking threatens to defile not just the kitchen and utensils, but also the housewife. Although the cook-maid Joan is praised for her cleaning of everything, she herself is called a "greasy frigat" (94). In contemporary drama, dirty cooks also abound. The pig-woman Ursula in Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* (1631), for example, is as "oily as the King's constable's lamp" and as "shining as his shoeing horn."[23] Similarly, in *The Comedy of Errors* (1590), the kitchen wench Nell is portrayed as "a very beastly creature."[24] She is "all grease" (3.2.4) and her complexion is "swart like [Dromio's] shoe" (3.2.100).[25] These women's filthiness has more to do with their working conditions than with poor personal hygiene. As Ursula complains, compared to the kitchen where she roasts pigs, "[h]ell's a kind of cold cellar to't" (2.2.44). Especially at a time when most cooking took place at open fires, it was

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19 The first eight lines focus on Joan's cleaning, and the next four lines on her cooking.

20 According to Hannah Woolley, there are "several rooms" that the scullery-maid "must keep sweet and clean, as the Kitchen, Pantry, Wash-house, &c." *The Gentlewomans Companion; Or, A Guide to the Female Sex, The Complete Text of 1675*, intr. Caterina Albano (Devon: Prospect Books, 2001), p. 211.

21 Woolley similarly instructs the cook-maid to see "all things scoured in due time" although it is the scullery-maid who should "wash and scowre all the Plates, Pots, Pans, Chamber-pots, with all other Iron, Brass, and Pewter materials that belong to the Chambers or Kitchen," pp. 209, 211.

22 Andrew Boorde, *The First Book of the Introduction of Knowledge: A Compendious Regiment or a Dietary of Health Made in Mountpyllier: Barnes in the Defense of the Berde*, ed. F. J. Furnivall (London: The Early English Text Society, 1870), p. 237.

23 Ben Jonson, *Bartholomew Fair*, ed. Edward B. Partridge (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), 2.2.117-118, hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

24 William Shakespeare, *The Comedy of Errors*, ed. R. A. Foakes (London: Methuen, 1962), 3.2.85, hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

25 Even the man-cook in Philip Massinger's *A New Way to Pay Old Debts*, the more prestigious upper servant in the aristocratic household, cannot avoid getting sweaty when he is "three parts roasted, / And the fourth part parboil'd" (1.2.33-34).

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almost impossible for a cook to remain clean or at least not sweaty. Even so, in *The Gentlewoman's Companion* (1675) Hannah Woolley advises the under-cook-maid: "if you please you may keep your self from being nasty, therefore let it be your care to keep your self clean."[26] Although fully aware of the "greasie and smutty"[27] nature of cooking, she still insists that it is the maid's negligence or laziness that results in her nastiness.

Since the housewife's dirtiness was believed to result from her idleness, she could purify and redeem herself only through her work. In order for the cook-maid in the ballad to be purged of dirt and adorned with the "ornament"[28] of cleanliness, she must first undertake assiduous cleaning of "all things" before she can use the surface of utensils as a mirror to "deck up her head and curle her hair" (7). More than improving the housewife's appearance, housework could change her from inside out. On the one hand, as Wendy Wall argues, the early modern housewife could "whiten skin and erase the traces of dirt, labor, aging, disease, and sunburn" by transforming waste materials such as urine or lard into cosmetics, perfumes, and sweating baths.[29] On the other hand, according to *Xenophon's Treaties of Hovsholde* (1534), by engaging herself in the "good exercise" of washing, boulting, baking, and shaking "keverlettes, hangynges, tappessary ware," she could even acquire a complexion of "better favored colour."[30] Ultimately, like the thrifty housewife in another ballad, a woman could miraculously transform herself from a woman who is "seldome cleanely" into the ideal of cleanliness by using the "trick of Huswife" to turn useless, filthy matter into profitable commodities.[31] Although she looks as dirty as "the charcoaled flower" and as black as "the brazen Crock," and smells as if "the flyes [blow] in her flock,"[32] her devotion to domestic economy could purify her and symbolically make her as clean as she could wish.

Unfortunately, such an attempt of self-purification was often thwarted by the transient effect of housework. Although the cook-maid in the ballad makes "e'ry thing as heart could wish," she can keep them clean only for a few hours. No sooner has the

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26 Woolley, p. 209.

27 Woolley, p. 209. Woolley divides cooking into various tasks distributed to a hierarchy of labor such as cook-maids, under-cook-maids, and scullery maids, and a great part of their work is to maintain cleanliness whether of their bodies or their working tools and environments, pp. 209-211.

28 Markham, p. 170.

29 Wendy Wall, *Staging Domesticity: Housework and English Identity in Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 46-47.

30 *Xenophon's Treaties of Hovsholde* (London, 1534), fol. 35-36.

31 For example, she never sweeps the house more than four times a year and sells the dust for a shilling or 14 pence. See "Seldome Cleanely," in *The Euing Collection of English Broadside Ballads*, intr. John Holloway (Glasgow: University of Glasgow Publications, 1971), p. 547.

32 "Seldome Cleanely," pp. 546-547.

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preparation of the next meal begun than everything is marred, and she becomes "the greasy frigat" again. Similarly, since "change or 'shifting' of clothing" at this period was "essential, even for the poorest"[33] the housewife had to undertake laundering frequently in order to supply clean clothes and linens to her family. Thus, Thomas Tusser may inadvertently voice the housewife's anxiety about the frequent, repetitive demand of her work when he says in *A Book of Huswifery* (1573): "Go wash well, saith Summer, with sun I will dry; / Go wring well, saith Winter, with wind so shall I."[34] Rather than mistaking the drying of laundry for the more laborious part of laundering, he could respond to the housewife's concern that the demand of clean clothes arises so frequently that, however "well" she washes and wrings, the laundry simply cannot dry off quickly enough to meet her family's needs in time. In this light, when the wife in "A Woman's Work Is Never Done" (1629) complains that "[t]here's never a day, from morn to night, / But [she] with work [is] tired quite,"[35] she is exhausted not just because her "labor is hard, / And all [her] pleasures debarr'd" (5-6), but also because her work simply can never be "done" for good. Unable to preserve the effect of her work, she may be suspected of doing nothing although she has done everything.

Given their ambivalent relationship with dirt, women hence risked becoming undifferentiated from vagrants who, associated with disease, dirt, and corruption, were believed to be idle as well. Due to the disastrous economic and demographic changes between 1560 and 1640, the problem of vagrancy worsened both quantitatively and qualitatively.[36] Although vagrants were victims of the disastrous economic and demographic shifts during the period, they were perceived as a menace to the social order and suspected of "stealing, robbing, murder, and many other mischiefs."[37] Forced to live in deprivation, vagrants probably couldn't help falling into "such incurable diseases and filthiness of bodyes," but they were believed to become so because they found idleness "more profitable to them then to doe anye woorke at

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33 Margaret Pelling, "Appearance and Reality: Barber-surgeons, the Body and Disease," in *London 1500-1700: the Making of the Metropolis*, ed. A. L. Beier and Roger Finlay (New York: Longman, 1986), p. 93. Similarly, Slack points out in *The Impact of Plague in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p. 209, that, in the medical prescriptions against plague written by the College of Physicians in 1578, it was recommended that clothes and bedding should be changed frequently.

34 Thomas Tusser, *Five Hundred Points of Good Husbandry, together with A Book of Huswifery* (1573), ed. William Mavor (London: Allen, and co., 1812), p. 257.

35 "A Woman's Work Is Never Done," in *The Roxburghe Ballads*, ed. WM. Chappell, F. S. A., vol. 3, 302-305 (Hertford: Stephen Austin and Sons, 1880), ll. 57-58, hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

36 Beier, p. 14.

37 Richard Morison, *A Remedy for Sedition (1536)*, ed. E. M. Cox (London: Golden Hours Press, 1933), p. 30.

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all."[38] Thomas Harman in *A Caveat or Warning for Common Cursitors* further suggests that some vagrants deliberately "wear filthy cloths on their heads, and never go without a piece of white soap about them" so that they can make themselves "the more pitied" and to "deceive . . . the common people, and gain much."[39] More than just a manifestation of their unwillingness to labor, their dirtiness became a disguise fabricated to conceal their craftiness and mischief.

As Paul Slack observes, "municipal by-laws against beggars and vagabonds were often issued at the same time as orders for cleaning the street."[40] Responsible for the cleaning of their households and the communal space adjacent to their houses,[41] women were placed in an opposing position to vagrants whose presence threatened to defile both. In one of his sermons, John Donne more explicitly connects domestic cleaning with suppression of vagrancy when he suggests that the transportation of vagrants to the colonies "shall sweep your streets, and wash your doors, from idle persons."[42] Such a conceptual analogy between domestic cleanliness and communal order also echoes the ideological analogy between family and state during the period. As the control of disorder and particularly gender disorder is believed to affirm all social order,[43] so women's daily cleaning is invested with a symbolic importance that pervades beyond the household. Unfortunately, since women's quest of cleanliness necessarily involves frequent contact with dirt, it simultaneously threatens to defile them and conflate them with the wandering poor. The anxiety about vagrancy hence is displaced onto women. As women are suspected of dirtiness and idleness, so they, like the two housewives in *Gammer Gurton's Needle*, are held accountable for the disorder caused by vagrants.

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38 R. H. Tawney and Eileen Power eds., *Tudor Economic Documents*, vol. 2 (London: Longmans, 1924), p. 318. Robert Copland in *The Highway to the Spital-house* (1535-6), for example, is appalled at the sight of the begging poor who are "With bag and staff, both crooked, lame and blind, / Scabby and scurvy, pock-eaten flesh and rind, / Lousy and scald, and peeled like as apes, / With scantly a rag for to cover their shapes, / Breechless, barefooted, all stinking with dirt," in *The Elizabethan Underworld*, ed. A. V. Judges (London: George Routledge & Sons, Ltd., 1930), p. 3.

39 *A Caveat*, p. 85.

40 Slack, *Povery and Policy*, p. 115.

41 For example, in Thomas Dekker's *The Shoemaker's Holiday*, Simon Eyre asks his wife Margery to "sweep . . . these kennels [near his workshop], that the noisome stench offend not the nose of my neighbours" (1.4.7-8). See Dekker, *The Shoemaker's Holiday*, ed. R. L. Smallwood and Stanley Wells (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1979).

42 Quoted in Linda Woodbridge, *Vagrancy, Homelessness, and English Renaissance Literature* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), p. 183.

43 Susan Dwyer Amussen, *An Ordered Society: Gender and Class in Early Modern England* (New York: B. Blackwell, 1988), p. 182.

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II

Written for the entertainment for undergraduates at Christ's College in Cambridgeshire, *Gammer Gurton's Needle*, as Curtis Perry admits, may appear to be "self-evidently a schoolboy's farce."[44] Nevertheless, as recent critics such as Perry, Paster, and Walk try to argue, the play is more than just "a college-man's indulgent laugh at unlearned country folk."[45] The Cambridge undergraduates, after all, did not live in the ivory tower, isolated from the world around them. Although women were conventionally treated as an obstacle to the male life of the mind, the scholars in Cambridge were not exactly living in seclusion since, according to Queen Elizabeth's proclamation in 1561, there were "prebendaries, students and members thereof being married [keeping] particular households with their wives, children and nurse."[46] As Paster and Wall both argue, they also needed to overcome the female influence that cared and nurtured them, and shaped the earlier stage of their life before they were initiated into manhood.[47] As they were not immune to the gender expectation of their time, so they could hardly be oblivious to the general anxiety about vagrancy. Certainly, this is not to deny that the portrayal of Diccon, as critics generally accept, is influenced by the tradition of the Vice in the morality play. Nevertheless, as long as the play identifies Diccon as "the Bedlam" (Dramatis Persona), a figure associated specifically with the lunatic vagrant, it also tries to create a character recognizable to the audience of its time. After all, Cambridge was as much overwhelmed by the inflow of wandering poor as any other part of the country.[48] It seems unlikely that the scholars, however isolated they were, could turn a blind eye to the gravity of the problem whenever they needed to venture out of the university.

From the very beginning, *Gammer Gurton's Needle* forces to the front the problem of vagrancy. Not only is Diccon the first character who opens the play, but he first informs us of the uproar in Gammer's house, framing it in the introduction of himself as a wayward bedlam and a thief who takes advantage of others' mischance. If his speech presents a disturbing picture of a vagrant invading private homes and disrupting order, it is perhaps more so when Hodge, as Kent Cartwright suggests, assumes the "physical presence" of Diccon's narrative and "provokes" the sight of the

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44 Perry, p.217.

45 Quoted in Perry, p.217.

46 David Cressy ed., *Education in Tudor and Stuart England* (London: Edward Arnold, 1975), p.126.

47 Gail Kern Paster, *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp.113-125. Wendy Wall, *Staging Domesticity: Housework and English Identity in Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp.59-76.

48 Slack, *Poverty and Policy,* pp.68, 69.

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audience as signs of "dirt and clay, and particularly excrement."[49] As soon as Hodge enters the stage, he says:

> See, so cham arrayed with dabbling in the dirt —
> She that set me to ditching, ich would she had the squirt!
> Was never poor soul that such a life had
> Gog's bones, this vilthy glay has dressed me too bad!
> God's soul, see how this stuff tears —
> Ich were better to be bearward and set to keep bears!
> By the mass, here is a gash, a shameful hole indeed;
> And one stitch tear further, a man may thrust in his head! (1.2.1-8)

Since clothing is "a world of social relations put upon the wearer's body,"[50] to have his clothes defiled or, rather, to have him re-dressed in clay is to detach Hodge temporarily from the set of social relations that defines his identity. With the opening of a "gash, a shameful hole" on his breeches, he is next compared to a "bearward," which brings him in close proximity to half-tamed beasts and symbolically removes him from the civilized, human world to its margin. Because bear gardens, usually located in the suburbs, were notorious for crime, poverty, and vagrancy,[51] he is also in danger of being confused with vagrants. Worse, when he comes home, he finds that there is "neither butter, cheese, milk, onions, flesh nor fish" (2.1.13) left for him; even the last "morsel of bacon" that he usually hides behind the door (2.1.28) for emergency is stolen by Diccon. Plagued by hunger, his "guts . . . yawl, crawl and all [his] belly rumbleth," and "[t]he puddings cannot lie still, each one over other tumbleth" (2.1.19-20). Eventually, he is so "vexed" with hunger that his body is in danger of exploding into pieces — with "one piece . . . at the spitalhouse, another at the castle's end" (2.1.22). With his body metaphorically fragmented and scattered all over the place, he hence risks becoming as out of place as Diccon who walks "divers and sundry ways" (1.1.1) and all "over the country" (1.1.6).

In danger of falling apart, Hodge hurries home for help, but finds his hope dashed because his gammer has lost the needle that could make him whole again. Although his crisis is much informed by the anxiety about vagrancy, his rage is vented not on Diccon but on Gurton:

> Whereto served your hands and eyes but this your nee'le to keep?
> What devil had you else to do? Ye kept, ich wot, not sheep!
> Cham fain abroad to dig and delve in water, mire and clay,
> Sossing and possing in the dirt still from day to day.
> A hundred things that be abroad, cham set to see them well,

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[49] Kent Cartwright, "*Gammer Gurton's Needle*: Towards a Dramaturgy of Empathy." *Renaissance Papers* (1993): p.127.

[50] Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.3.

[51] Beier, pp.42-43.

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And four of you sit idle at home and cannot keep a nee'le! (1.4.23-28)

While Hodge's hostility toward Gammer expresses his vulnerability and dependence on her housework,[52] it also reveals how futile her labor is. She has more than once stitched the pants "with sturdy packthread" (1.2.16), but her needlework simply cannot endure Hodge's hard labor, which in turn calls her labor into question. Whereas the "dirt" on Hodge's body serves to testify to the "hundred things" that he has done abroad, the repeatedly defiled pants and unseamed stitches undermine her authority in her husbandless home and render her vulnerable to the accusation of idleness, an accusation justified by the loss of the needle. Awake to the realization that his fantasy of sitting with his mistress "by the fire, [helping] here and there a stitch" (2.1.36), is nothing but a fantasy, Hodge cannot help feeling "pooped" (2.1.37) indeed. Marginalized by his tattered and bespattered appearance in the public space, he finds himself further alienated from the home that defines who he is in the first place.

As soon as Gammer fails to fulfill her duty, her house changes into an unfamiliar space of filth and darkness. Enraged by what he considers as a betrayal on Gammer's part, Hodge decides to "seek and grope wherever [the needle] be" (1.4.37). To help him, Gammer sends Cock to fetch "an inch of a white tallow candle" (1.4.42) hidden somewhere "behind the old brass pan" within "an old shoe" (1.4.40-41). The search of the candle, however, only reveals more pockets of obscure and nasty spaces in the house. While the "old brass pan" as a tool for female labor tinges the house with an aura of filth, decay, and femininity, the "shoe" as "a symbol for a woman's genitals" ("Shoe" def. 1) represents the danger of female desire, which like the "guts" of Gib that Hodge later tries to "rake" (3.4.17), threatens to devour both the candle and the needle. As Hodge is "tumbling and tossing amidst the floor, / Raking there some fire to find among the ashes dead" (1. 5.12-13), the house metamorphoses into an insidious dirt-breeding labyrinth, in which "Gib our cat's two eyes" appear like "fire" (1.5.15-16), and "a straw" (1.5.47), like a "nee'le" (1.5.48). When he is led into believing that Gib the cat would "fire the house if that she were not taken" (1.5.27), Gammer's female influence further joins forces with the untamed power of "Gib," "Gib's mother," and "all the generation of cats both far and near" (1.5.43-44) to prey on him. In his attempt to catch Gib, Hodge suffers yet another wave of pollution when he breaks "both his shins," falls into "cursing and swearing" that are "never of his making" (1.5.25-26), and ultimately comes face to face with "a cat's turd" (1.5.53). It hardly matters that Gammer swept the floor and carried the dust "to th'end here of town" (1.4.9-10) just a while ago. Her supposed idleness transforms the house from an orderly, homey space into a chaotic world governed by beastly and feminine powers.

[52] Paster sees Hodge's hostility to Gammer as "the infantile rage and vulnerability of the male when maternal women retain control over male bodily thresholds and thus over access to contested arenas of social and sexual privilege," p.118. Wall concurs that the contradiction between Hodge's "sense of the insignificance of women's work" and "the trauma that the lost needle causes" reveals his "vulnerable and dependent place," p.64.

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The deterioration of the domestic space immediately prompts Gammer into other disorderly behavior that makes her a threat to the community as well. While the needle serves as "the tool that guarantees the housewife's authority in her husbandless home"[53] it simultaneously helps keep the vagrant's potential for disorder under control. After all, had Gammer kept the needle, she would not have been "driven to such fits" (1.1.17) that Diccon had the opportunity to wander into her "door cheeks" (1.1.7) and to steal away Hodge's "slip of bacon" (1.1.22). Once it is lost, however, disorder ensues. As Hodge asks her, "Where ha' you been fidging abroad since your nee'le lost?" (1.4.33). As soon as she ventures abroad to look for the needle, she violates the principle of good housekeeping, poses herself as a threat to other households, and jeopardizes the order and harmony of the community. Thus, when she, misled by Diccon's lies, travels to Dame Chat's "own doors to chide [her]" (3.3.4), her neighbor immediately asks: "Intends thou and that knave me in my house to murder" (3.3.6)? Since Gammer never enters her house throughout their conflict, the danger posed by the former should be less threatening than that by Diccon who, having been "within [the house himself] . . . even now" (4.4.36), knows by heart "every door the pin" (4.4.19) and the "hole" that was "brok down, even within these two days" (4.3.33) on the "backside" (4.4.14) of the house. For Chat, however, it is Gammer, not Diccon, who represents the deadly threat of wandering housebreakers.[54]

Linda Woodbridge suggests that in early modern England "anxiety about contagious diseases invading the body was persistently connected with fear of dangerous rogues outside the house."[55] Like an infectious disease, Gammer's attempted invasion not only lays the inside of Dame Chat's house in the open, but also triggers the outbreak of disorder that has long existed in it. Ostensibly, Dame Chat would not have taken her "rejection of women's 'quiet' and obedience out of the household and into public view"[56] had not Gammer accused her of stealing the needle. Nevertheless, Chat is hardly a model housewife herself as she indulges in the unlawful game of carding[57] and tempts other women into neglecting their housewifery duties and gadding abroad. Moreover, long before Gammer arrived, she has already deviated from the path of order when she allows her self to be "ruled" by the "tale" (2.2.53,52) of a footloose madman. Thus, despite her self-righteous attempt to "teach" Gammer to "keep home" (3.3.27), she behaves just like her neighbor when she ventures into the street and scolds like a shrew. When she sees Hodge enter with "a staff" (3.3.sd.), she

53 Paster, p. 188.

54 Beier mentions that "violent burglaries were not unknown," p.132. For instance, a house-breaker named Hampshire Will and an accomplice tied up and threatened to murder the families they despoiled in Berkshire and Oxfordshire in 1623.

55 Woodbridge, p. 182.

56 Amussen, p. 122.

57 See the prohibition against carding in *Tudor Royal Proclamations* (1: 88).

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further orders her maid to "bring me out my spit" (3.3.39), turning her hostile words into violent actions, and a familiar household tool into a deadly weapon that threatens to kill.

Frustrated by Gammer's futile attempts to recover the needle, Hodge next seeks help from other men, who are treated as reliable workers with more professional skills than women. The distinction of men's work from women's begins with a differential evaluation of their tools. As women's work was ill-defined and considered trivial in early modern society, so the "nee'le" in Gammer's hand is but a "little thing" which, despite Hodge's detailed description, only puts his audience "more in doubt" (2.1.40, 43, 45). Nevertheless, no sooner has he described the needle as "what Tom Tailor's man sits broaching through a clout" than it is transformed from an "eel" into a "nee' le" (2.1.46, 41, 48) and conferred with a professional, masculine identity. Gammer may not be smart enough to borrow a needle from Dame Chat or the alewife Mother Bee,[58] but it has never occurred to Hodge to do the same, either. Instead, he turns to "Sim Glover's shop . . . for a thong, / Therewith this breech to tache and tie as [he] may" (2.2.32-33). True to the spirit of male camaraderie, the glove maker, perceiving Hodge's "need to be so straight and hard" (3.1.5), immediately lends him both "a thong" (3.1.3) and a "nawl to set the jib forward" (3.1.5-6). With the professional tools in hand, Hodge finally has the confidence that he could "make shift good enough" and amend "the chief hole in [his] breech" (3.1.9-10) without Gammer's help.

Puffed up by the newly acquired confidence, Hodge attempts to venture on a symbolic raking of the dark and filthy inside of Gib (3.4.18), who like its human counterparts, is suspected of swallowing the needle "in her guts" (3.4.18). Similarly, Doctor Rat tries to make a "forcible invasion" (5.1.10) into the "privy way" (5.2.187) of Dame Chat's house, a feminine space of another kind, hoping to catch "the bitchfox and the nee'le together" (4.4.32-33) by surprise. Nevertheless, as the disastrous ending of Rat's intrusion suggests, such a venture may be more dangerous than Hodge imagines. Indeed, as Chat is identified with a cunning beast preying on men for their possessions, so her house, with a stomach-like cauldron[59] on "the furnace or lead" (4.3.31) behind its "privy way" (5.2.187), is like a gigantic female body that threatens to slay its intruder and to consume him alive. As soon as Rat crawls in, he falls into a cauldron full of "scalding water" (4.3.40). Next, he is "so evil dressed" (4.4.48) as if he were a piece of meat that even Diccon is worried that Chat and her maid "will beat out his brain" (4.4.44). With Chat's housewifery going awry, the house that is supposed to provide food, warmth, and comfort to people hence mutates into a hell-like

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[58] Robinson, p.65. Perry, accusing Gammer of being "too concerned about maintaining her own property and therefore unable to offer or ask for support," concurs that "this kind of practical neighborliness never occurs to Gammer Gurton," p.224.

[59] See Thomas Vicary's *A Profitable Treatise of the Anatomie of Man's Body* (London, 1577), p. 69, for example, for the description of how the liver would heat up "the stomache as the heate of the fyre is to the Potte or Cauldron."

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space of filth, danger, and darkness; rather than being the potential victim of "murder" (3.3.6), she and her maid also become "murderers" (4.4.54), who butcher and cook men for their consumption.

As soon as the quarrel between the villagers begins to turn violent, Master Bailey is summoned to restore the order. The bailiff immediately identifies Diccon as "the cause of all this brawl" (5.2.181), but he sees the latter's behavior merely as "a sport alone" (5.2.196). When he asks Diccon whether he has "made a lie or two, to set these two by the ears" (5.2.220), the latter replies in defiance:

> What if I have? Five hundred such have I seen within these seven years.
> I am sorry for nothing else but that I see not the sport
> Which was between them when they met, as they themselves report.
> (5.2.221-223)

Enraged by the bedlam's lack of remorse, Doctor Rat insists that his punishment should be "naught else but the gallows" (5.2.239), which according to Beier, was the usual punishment of vagrants under the first two Elizabethan statutes.[60] Bailey, however, disagrees. Considering Rat's proposed punishment "too sore" (5.2.240) and too "great" (5.2.242), he tells Diccon: "Where [Doctor Rat] will pay for all, thou never draw thy purse. . . . If [Goodwife Chat] refuse thy money once, never to offer it twice. . . . When thou mayst drink of free cost, thou never forsake it" (5.2.273, 277, 279). Such a punishment seems to aim not so much to "recompense" (5.2.269) the villagers for their loss as to ensure that Diccon can continue eating the fruit of others without paying for it. In doing so, Bailey as the representative of legal order indirectly endorses Diccon's definition of himself as a disinterested observer and holds the villagers themselves accountable for the confusion in the village.

Once redeemed by law, Diccon is further entrusted with the responsibility for recovering the needle and facilitating the fashioning of Hodge's identity. The glover's thong may have helped Hodge patch up his confidence, but ultimately it is Diccon who, by enabling him to take hold of the needle so that "it goes no more astray" (5.2.304), helps him achieve independence and self-mastery. When the first time Diccon promises to retrieve the needle by conjuring up the devil, Hodge is so afraid that he loses bodily control and befouls not just his breeches but also the hall. It is only in the final scene when Diccon is made to swear on Hodge's breeches to make amends for his "former action" (5.2.268) that Hodge is forced to confront the "devil" and have it at his "commanding" (2.3.10). Alluding to Hodge's soiling himself for fear of the devil in an earlier scene, Diccon says to Hodge, "take good heed now thou do not beshite me!" (5.2.290), while giving him "*a good blow on the buttock*" (5.2.s.d.). No sooner has Diccon inadvertently striken the needle in Hodge's breeches "far in [his] buttock" (5.2.307), Hodge cries out in pain, "He thrust me into the buttock with a bodkin or a pin" (5.2.293). As he retrieves the needle from his buttock, however, he exclaims in

[60] Beier, p. 160.

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amazement, "Will you see the devil, gammer?" (5.2.296). The "devil" that will recover his needle for him thus coalesces with the "needle" that will restore his identity. Only then does Hodge realize that, in order to "stop this gap" and to keep him from being "utterly undone" (2.1.60), he must be able to keep his "standing" (2.1.9) and hold his "arse-strings" (2.1.108) despite his fear. The pricking may have "almost undone" (5.2.307) him, but it simultaneously restores his sense of integrity by literally plugging the hole. Although he means to say that Diccon has stabbed a needle into his buttock, he sounds as if he himself is driven into the body through the very passage that has previously given him away. The experience of being folded back into the body through the "privy way" also forces him to reverse the experience of birth and be born again — only this time, by and through himself.

Once the needle is found, the order in the village seems to be restored as well, but not quite. Hodge's response to the needle's recovery may signify a return to the domestic hierarchy when he, contrary to his previous hostility and disdain, asks for Gammer's approval: "Am I not a good son, Gammer, am I not" (5.2.309)? His assumption of the role of a "good son," however, by no means puts him back to his former state of subservience and dependency. If Hodge has to rely on Gammer's washing and needlework to maintain his identity, now it is her turn to depend on this "good son" to remove her from the state of being "undone" (1.3.16). The needle may belong to Gammer in name, but Hodge has finally earned the right of its mastery and possession: "ich knew that ich must find it, else chould a' had it never" (5.2.311). Retrospectively, his pride also confirms his earlier accusation of her and her maid for being "so foolish . . . you know it not when you it see" (1.5.38). Ironically, although Gammer's industry and her ability to run the household are discredited throughout the play, Diccon, who has caused "all this brawl" (5.2.181) and for having "almost undone us all" (5.2.244), is thanked "twenty times" (5.2.319) in the end. If he is the one who has driven the villagers out of their isolated homes, it is also up to him to bring about the unity and harmony of the community. As his prank works to gather them all together as a group, so his discovery of the needle helps reconcile the conflicts between them as they, together with Diccon, march off to a drinking party. This way, not only is the wandering madman assimilated into the community, but the unruly force of vagrancy that haunted the worst nightmare of early modern English people is also transformed into the power of social reunification — unfortunately, at the expense of those women whose independent lifestyle simply cannot fit into the social expectation of women.

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《葛根婆的縫衣針》一劇之遊民、家庭主婦、與髒亂之性別政治

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遊民問題是前現代英國社會最困擾的社會問題之一。在當時英國人的眼中，這些貧困的無業遊民不但行爲脫序、居無定所，也常是髒亂、污染、與麻煩的源頭。當時的大眾文學更常將其描繪成危害善良社會之罪犯。儘管當時主流文化對遊民普遍觀感惡劣，《葛根婆婆的針》(c. 1560) 一劇卻以輕鬆幽默的方式呈現其遊民的主角 Diccon，輕描淡寫地處理其諸多搗亂的行爲。現代批評家一方面淡化處理 Diccon 的負面行爲，另一方面則傾向把與遊民相關的髒亂與脫序等問題歸咎到劇中其他的村民，特別是 Gammer Gurton 和她的鄰居 Dame Chat 兩個單身女人的身上。如此一來，他們不只淡化了遊民問題在當時的重要性，更複製了當時把女人 (特別是獨立持家的女人) 視爲危險與混亂之來源的刻板印象。

本文主張該劇透過對 Diccon 喜劇化的處理無疑是將對遊民的焦慮轉嫁到兩位單身的家庭主婦身上。而這種轉嫁動作之所以能成立，主要因爲遊民與家庭主婦都常與髒亂和懶惰連想在一起。表面上，前現代英國的家庭主婦應該是髒亂的天敵，因爲她們不僅需要負責維持家裡的清潔，也要清理家園四周的環境。然而，正因爲她們必須經常清除各種垃圾汙垢，她們難免也會受其污染，無法隨時保持自己外表的整齊清潔，而招來懶惰的指控。從這個角度看來，《葛根婆婆的針》一劇中所呈現的髒亂與其代表了兩位女主人的懶惰與無能，其實反映了她們每天要面對髒亂、永遠無法根除髒亂的困境。然而，由於她們與骯髒汙垢之曖昧卻又親近的關係，她們也容易成爲眾人懷疑與批評的目標，進而成爲 Diccon 所帶來之諸多混亂的代罪羔羊。

關鍵字:《葛根婆的縫衣針》　家事　遊民　髒亂　性別

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The Sporty Bedlam, Idle Housewives, and the Gender Politics of Dirt in *Gammer Gurton's Needle*

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In early modern England, one of the most pressing social problems was vagrancy. Unemployed and deprived, vagrants were not only considered rootless and disorderly, but associated and even conflated with dirt, pollution and peril that threatened to endanger the society. In popular literature, they were also portrayed as despicable and immoral criminals, threatening to endanger respectable society and the state. Although contemporaries' perception of vagrants is generally negative, the representation of bedlam Diccon in *Gammer Gurton's Needle* (c. 1560) seems far from typical in its light-hearted portrayal of his disorderly behavior. If the play downplays the negative implications of Diccon as a bedlam, critics replicate this tendency as well. In their reading, the kind of dirt and disorder usually associated with vagrants are attributed, instead, to the villagers, more specifically to Gammer Gurton and Dame Chat. This way, critics not only downplay the problem of vagrancy, but also reinforce a contemporary stereotype of woman, especially independent single woman, as the source of danger and disorder.

It is the contention of this article that, while the play displaces anxiety about vagrancy onto the two housewives, such a displacement is facilitated by the conceptual conflation between women and vagrants, a conflation made possible by their common association with dirtiness and idleness. Ostensibly, early modern housewives had a close affinity with cleanliness because they were responsible for purifying their households from every kind of dirt and disorder. However, forced by their duty to have direct, frequent contact with waste matter, they also risked being polluted by it, which simultaneously rendered them suspect of idleness. From this perspective, the dirt and disorder in *Gammer Gurton's Needle* represent not so much the two housewives' idleness and incompetence as the very work that they struggle with everyday. Due to their intimate yet ambivalent relationship with dirt and disorder, they become easy targets for suspicion and censure, and are scapegoated for Diccon's errant behavior.

Keywords: *Gammer Gurton's Needl*e housework vagrant dirt gender

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