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Early Modern Cultural Studies

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The Other Exchange

Women, Servants, and the
Urban Underclass in Early
Modern English Literature

DENYS VAN RENEN

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In memory of
Victor and Nancy Mignone

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Introduction | *Early Modern Multitudes*

This book takes as its guiding methodology that the ideational basis for the emerging middle class—especially as it is fostered in Joseph Addison and Richard Steele’s *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*—derives from subjects with limited economic and social status in the early modern period. Hence “the Other Exchange,” interactions among a diverse cross-section of the English underclass and women, vies with Addison and Steele’s depiction of enriching commerce at the Royal Exchange, a site they portray as frequented by the economic (male) elite.¹ By the early eighteenth century *The Spectator*, as Eugenia Jenkins points out, “disseminated an image of London as an ‘emporium for the whole Earth’ to a growing body of consumers outside of London.”² Yet this image of England’s economic strength neglects significant contributions from women and the working poor that are underrepresented in critical scholarship of the period as well. While many recent works illuminate the lives of itinerant workers—thought to be, as Patricia Fumerton informs us, “30 to 50 percent of the early modern English population”—I center on the ways in which they either provide the conceptual framework or embody the economic trends and cultural institutions of the period.³ As Fumerton also notes, her study swelled “numerically and spatially” when research revealed the sheer extent of the working poor—both men and women—or what she calls the “unsettled” in England.⁴ I broadened this study to include representations of “elite” women in a strict socioeconomic sense because writers like Aphra Behn and Eliza Haywood align the concerns of these women with the pursuits and dynamism traditionally associated with the lower orders. In particular, Behn’s and Haywood’s depictions of propertied women epitomize how men increasingly deny or stigmatize women’s contributions to movements that women helped foster or reenergize.

Indeed, *The Spectator* is fascinated as well with how the market and social economies fostered by women and the urban underclass repeat-

edly propel England's growth; this book argues that while these groups, for the most part, do not possess financial capital, they embody or exercise other strengths characteristic of market economies: mobility, collaboration, and coordination, which compensate for immiseration and/or marginalization. Several prose works by Addison illustrate the central premise of this book: the middle class appropriates the economic and social life of women and the lower orders while simultaneously disowning the connection. In no. 69, a composite portrayal of woman as reified consumer, Addison attempts to ensconce women as customers rather than drivers of the market.⁵ In another issue he obscures the workings of the lower orders, an obfuscation that repeatedly recurs in literature of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

In his magisterial study *The Origins of the English Novel* (1987), Michael McKeon argues that middle-class consciousness arose as a result of "an earlier series of attempts to reform aristocratic elite culture."⁶ While McKeon demonstrates that the ideology of the "middling sort" was a reaction against the abuses of the elite, this book argues that several major authors of the period represent the itinerant workers, women, and other marginalized groups as steering the ways in which England navigates the shifting cultural, economic, and political terrain of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁷ These groups seized the new opportunities offered by commercial and imperial expansion and laid the bedrock for England's rise. That is, in addition to defining themselves against the abuses of the aristocratic cultural elite, the "middling sort" incorporated the economic logic and cultural practices, including improvisation and self-invention, of the lower classes in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

Seventeenth-century playwrights, including Thomas Dekker, John Fletcher, Richard Brome, and many others, frequently represented vagabonds because they, perhaps paradoxically, seemed deeply enmeshed in England's domestic modernization and commercial expansion, including fen drainage projects, privatization of common lands, transportation, shipping, and settlement abroad. Most notably, these authors sort through how to incorporate English subjects on the fringes of society or masterless men into England's economy and foster a coherent

social imaginary. The urban underclass and rural vagabonds, however, proved a versatile signifier: at times, they symbolized a bygone feudal system and evoked nostalgic fantasies, and, at others, they operated as placeholders for emerging economies. Representations of vagabond society usually emerge at times of heightened social unrest—during the depression of the 1620s (Fletcher), on the eve of the War of the Three Kingdoms (Brome), or in response to the Whig oligarchy led by Robert Walpole in the 1720s (John Gay), for example.⁸ Even so, although late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century literature provides exceptions—among them Thomas Shadwell’s depiction of legal exceptional space in *The Squire of Alsatia* (1688) and John Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera* (1728)—literary representations of masterless men starkly decreased in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.⁹

While I do not have the space to provide an extended discussion of this literary and social turn, a few reasons for the reduced representations of vagabonds included global commerce and colonization, which not only provided increased economic opportunities but also increased encounters with foreign peoples. While early seventeenth-century literature exoticizes vagrants, interactions with racial and ethnic others in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries Anglicizes them; in a sense England’s “internal colonies” do not seem quite as exotic when increasing numbers of Englishmen—and women—traveled to Africa, Asia, and the Americas.¹⁰ This cultural contact with other countries, however, increased the invisibility of the poor; the gap between the English and others widened as the English distinguished between phenotypic or cultural markers, but the face of Englishness remained the well-born or well-off man.¹¹ Amid this literary and cultural landscape, authors contested the occlusion of peripheral or marginalized groups. Writers of plays, historical fiction, and romances encompass the lives of itinerant workers and women, recognizing that the viability of the nation hinges on the contributions of a wide swath of the English public. “Naturalists,” including Daniel Defoe in his *The True-Born Englishman* (1700), as Wolfram Schmidgen explains, describe how transactions with heterogeneous surroundings are integral to bodily and national health: “Calls for racial, religious, or linguistic purity were detrimental

to the well-being of the nation”; “blending with the world and of the world’s ingredients . . . [was] a vital agent in the expansion, integration, and improvement of nature, societies, and peoples.”¹² These categories were also, of course, shot through with economic fears, for dismissals of certain sects and speech stemmed from an increasingly competitive marketplace. Exclusionary economic policies, though, threatened England’s efforts to vie with Spain, France, and the Netherlands.

As state-sponsored capitalism eventually restructured economic relations, the public was even less likely to entertain depictions of alternative communities that competed with dominant economic practices. Fewer literary representations, however, do not mean that Restoration and eighteenth-century literature does not observe the social capital and networks of the working poor. In *The Spectator*, no. 367, “Addison on the Benefits of the Paper,” Addison, noticing the resourcefulness of the poor, exemplifies an ideology that tries to establish the lower orders as dependent on the largesse of the elite. He depicts the middle class as cultured owners of factories or corporate entities that employ the indigent and the working poor as grateful laborers. Depicting the poor as increasingly dependent on the employment he provides as a publisher, Addison promotes the charity of the elite reading public toward laborers. Like McKeon, Terry Eagleton argues that the aim of *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* “is one of class-consolidation, a codifying of the norms and regulating of the practices whereby the English bourgeoisie may negotiate an historic alliance with its social superiors.”¹³ If so, the entry price to form this pact with the monarchy is a guarantee that the middle class can control vagrants, groups that historically threatened the social order. My contention, though, is that, like the other works represented in this book, Addison draws more from the behaviors and practices of itinerant workers than from the elite. While Addison aims “to produce the general reader to whom [the papers] are addressed,” elements of society resist this inauguration of “a new kind of community,” not because they are primitive or uncivilizable but because they already embody or practice some of the behaviors he attempts to inculcate.¹⁴

Addison denies the poor the “Formal” benefits, or intellectual improvement or pleasure; they reap the “Material benefits,” as the

manufacturing and printing of the periodical “consume a considerable quantity of our Paper Manufacture, employ our Artisans in Printing, and find Business for great Numbers of indigent Persons.”¹⁵ Writing essays and publishing *The Spectator*, Addison chooses to believe that he is providing “daily Subsistence” and “Bread for a Multitude.”¹⁶ He, in short, makes little distinction between distributing alms to the poor (charity) and printing and circulating his periodical. Addison’s amiable condescension, however, sometimes belies the ways in which he depicts the poor as cognizant of the structures and networks that undergird global commerce. While Addison’s “Multitude” seems to share little with the concept in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s *Multitude* (2004)—which the authors define as a global body of people that appreciate differences while cooperating and complementing each other—the eighteenth-century arbiter of tastes and avatar of the middle class also surprisingly lays some of the groundwork for the production of this “coordinated ensemble.”¹⁷ Nicholas Tampio’s apt summary for the multitude—characterized as a nomadic entity “circulating the globe in ever-accelerating flows, and miscegenated, hybridizing identities and cultures”¹⁸—points to the main challenge to Hardt and Negri—namely, their utopian idealism, which combines contradictory historical traditions and masks deep divisions among groups with similar aims. I am interested, though, in what Hardt and Negri unearth: a coordinated body that exhibits attributes usually associated with capitalism and globalization and that, I argue, stretches back to the seventeenth century.

Hardt and Negri describe the ascendancy of immaterial labor and the class divergences it creates. Circulated knowledge and information create wealth, while physical labor is largely relegated to the global poor: “In the dominant countries, immaterial labor is central to most of what statistics show are the fastest-growing occupations. . . . There is a corresponding trend for many forms of material production, such as industry and agriculture, to be transferred to subordinate parts of the world.” These data, they assert, “show that the hegemony of immaterial labor is emerging in coordination with the existing global divisions of labor and power.”¹⁹ *Spectator* no. 367 seems to subscribe to

this bifurcation. Addison describes *The Spectator* as a public works project, separating the lives of his readers from those of the working poor and thereby limiting power to the middle class. McKeon argues that the “very fluidity and indeterminacy of social categories is a crucial precondition for revolutionary behavior. Revolution occurs under social conditions of status inconsistency, and revolutionaries are those in whom these conditions have been most completely internalized as a psychological state.”²⁰ As Addison helps stratify the middling sort, he must widen the gulf between middle class and the working poor to blunt these impulses.

The working poor, however, do use his periodical, seemingly blurring the lines of demarcation among social classes. But Addison anticipates these sometimes unflattering uses. In what seems a self-deprecating moment, for example, he depicts his paper as essential for all manner of domestic and bodily activities: “If I do not take care to obviate some of my witty Readers, they will be apt to tell me, that my Paper, after it is thus Printed and Published, is still beneficial to the Publick on several Occasions.”²¹ He concedes that in addition to using *The Spectator* as toilet paper, Londoners use it as tinder, as wrapping paper for spices, and as a “Good Foundation for a Mutton-pye.”²² His anticipation of the ways in which readers and nonreaders alike employ his periodical acts to short-circuit latent revolutionary impulses. The power of appropriation stems from the unforeseen renegotiation of symbolic and linguistic capital; “obviate[ing] some of my witty Readers” empties the act—signifying the periodical as waste—of its challenge to authority. Moreover, Addison embeds the periodical with the most everyday and private domestic practices; the omnipresent journal operates as the interface between even nonreaders and their surroundings. Controlling the lives of the poor through his periodical, he denies them the means to form their own interconnections.²³ The poor may use the pages to start a fire, bake for the holidays, or clean up after themselves, but Addison has already dictated these isolated actions. Only through “cooperation and communication” can individuals coalesce “to become active and emerge as a political force.”²⁴ Moreover, for the poor, the periodical never possesses symbolic value or cultural cachet that exceeds the mar-

ket rate for the material; in a similar way, unlike the intangible wealth capitalism produces, the circulation of the paper—the poor produce the paper and use its materiality—never increases its value.

If Addison's repeated references to itinerants bespeak the periodical's inherent contradictions, his depictions of the wealthy borders on indifference; in no. 367 he entertains his readers with the consumption habits of his august consumers, but his engagement with them ends there. No. 367 describes the middle class, respected authors and printers, as not only servicing the aristocracy, but also furnishing the symbols that signal nobility. Below I quote a significant section of no. 367 because it is useful to juxtapose with the poor's use of the paper's materiality; a well-bound book also mediates relationships among the monarchs of Europe:

The politest Nations of *Europe* have endeavoured to vie with one another for the Reputation of the finest Printing; Absolute Governments, as well as Republicks, have encouraged an Art which seems to be the noblest and most beneficial that was ever invented among the Sons of Men. The Present King of *France*, in his Pursuits after Glory, has particularly distinguished himself by the promoting of this useful Art, insomuch that several Books have been printed in the *Louvre* at his own Expence, upon which he sets so great a value, that he considers them as the noblest Presents he can make to Foreign Princes and Ambassadors.²⁵

The printing presses operate as the hidden levers of power. Even if the poor handle and use the low-end consumer items while the aristocracy displays and circulates luxury items, print and its circulation structure social and cultural relations. Addison even makes a direct comparison between printed material and England's war efforts: the "several Presses" in England have made "our own Nation as glorious upon this Account, as for its late Triumphs and Conquests," a reference to the Duke of Marlborough's victories on the Continent during the War of the Spanish Succession.²⁶

The aristocracy may help signal the cultural cachet of British printing houses, but Addison expends little energy on them in the sense

that he depicts the monarchs as customers and as ornamentation that enhance the power of the printers. His industry is enmeshed in global trade, yet he describes a supply chain of which the elite have little conception: “It is pleasant enough to consider the Changes that a Linnen fragment undergoes, by passing through the several Hands abovementioned. The finest Pieces of Holland, when worn to tatters, assume a new Whiteness more beautiful than their first, and often return in the shape of Letters to their Native Country.”²⁷ Needless to say, the objects—papers and clothes—serve as metonyms for the poor and the elite. The middle class manufactures both these materials, but one group is intimately familiar with the production processes while the other considers only one stage—when the material assumes its peak aesthetic and monetary value—and cares little about the circuit, “the Changes that a Linnen fragment undergoes.” This “cozy kinship among manufacturing, ownership and private life,” as Chloe Smith nicely terms it, fascinates Addison.²⁸ The limited interest in this circuit inevitably constrains the power of the elite in an era that puts increasing emphasis on information and circulation. One can reconstruct the descent of Dutch textiles from the nobleman’s closet to the pawnshop, where it may be resold to others in reduced positions. Addison, however, shows how this downward trajectory, like a stream that descends into the earth only to reappear in a different region later, provides fragments of global trade routes. When these rags reappear later as letters, “more beautiful than” the ornate and refined clothes, Addison indicates that the elite would either be uninterested in or unable to piece together the whole narrative.

The middle class exclusively enjoys the immaterial and economic benefits of the printing of periodicals and books, but Addison repeatedly notes that “by passing through the several Hands [of the working poor] abovementioned,” the periodical is beholden to the poor for its distribution and reach. They, in other words, do not enjoy the pure whiteness of the finished product but are responsible for the networks that make it possible. That is, the cultural authority of the middle class that this paper promulgates is irrelevant to the poor; instead the poor’s reinterpretation of the paper provokes the underlying anx-

iety in no. 367. Even if, then, the poor do not read his periodical, they accumulate knowledge and power through what seems like negligible contact through labor. Hardt and Negri repeatedly emphasize that the poor practice and embody immaterial labor through their global migrations. Among other attributes, they highlight “the production of ideas, images, knowledges, communication, cooperation, and affective relations”; their linguistic inventiveness; and multifaceted interactions among peoples of different ethnicities, races, and gender.²⁹ Even if he downplays and tries to preempt the poor, Addison illustrates the formidability of laborers to body forth networks that compete with print. The elite’s limited use of bound volumes to demonstrate prestige and even the middle class’s consumption of their content appear uninventive compared to how the urban underclass “translates” them to serve its purposes and thereby foster a fluid and formidable counterpublic.

Taking the cue from Hardt and Negri, this book tries to illuminate the notion that rather than respond to ways in which the wealthy establish and concretize their power, the working poor provide the template for the conditions of capitalism: “In the paradigm of immaterial production, in production based on communication and collaboration, ‘the poor’ is the primary figure of production in the sense that society tends to produce [it] as a coordinated ensemble.”³⁰ Noting the limited efficacy of these papers to control the poor even with his efforts to render them dependent on his enterprise, Addison emphasizes the resourcefulness of his nonreaders, who repurpose his paper and fulfill a variety of needs that he did not anticipate. Their determination contrasts with an impressionable public who reacts in volatile ways to domestic turmoil and English ventures abroad. For the middling sort, print, as Steele explains, can serve as a fetish or substitute for immediacy or bodily presence. That is, on some level, he acknowledges the ways in which it distorts and changes social relations. A captured soldier, expecting execution, for example, “writ on the Thursday [to his wife], and was to be executed on the Friday: But considering that the Letter would not come to his Wife’s Hands till Saturday, the Day after Execution,” he wrote that he “was hanged, drawn and quartered.” “I died,” he concluded, “very penitently.”³¹ His friends, though, rescue him,

and, as such, Addison demonstrates how the finality and permanence of print even supersedes death. While he endeavors to reimagine this relationship to print, he also exploits its power, reinforcing the hierarchy between immaterial and material labor.

The poor not only exercise various modes of production and consumption but also, this parable suggests, exhibit aspects of immaterial labor that involve vitality and dynamism. Trying to emphasize his beneficence, Addison dimly registers how the imagined community he fosters is preceded by a vibrant public that already possesses some of the characteristics that he tries to inculcate: “When I trace in my Mind a bundle of Rags to a Quire of *Spectators*, I find so many Hands employ’d in every Step they take thro’ their whole Progress, that while I am writing a *Spectator*, I fancy my self providing Bread for a Multitude.”³² This self-satisfied description of the paper’s “progress” is a classic example of expropriation in which “Bread for the Multitude” does not compensate for the “so many Hands employ’d in every Step they take thro’ their whole Progress.” He tries to take credit for ordering a community through the supply chain that produces his periodical—he even conjures them into existence (“I trace in my Mind”). Yet in the same issue he acknowledges the ingenuity with which the poor make use of the paper; Addison, in short, belatedly attempts to delineate the contours of a socioeconomic community that already operates by its own parameters.

Efforts to downplay the economic and cultural contributions of the poor and women appear across literature from 1626 to 1726; I have chosen to analyze literature written during times of economic, political, and health crises in England because these moments reveal the cracks in elite ideologies that try to obscure the roles of the poor and women. Over six chapters I pay close attention to the sociocultural shifts that expose the gaps in aristocratic and commercial hegemony. Each chapter centers on the struggle between women and the working class and the “middling sort” or, later, the middle class over a particular object or system of signification; these include the following: Jonson, species/news; Brome, the town; Behn, the theater; Farquhar, air; Defoe, the plague; Haywood, genre. Because these marginalized groups do not operate

within a mutually constitutive arrangement—the middling sort reproduces aristocratic cultural practices, while the aristocracy endeavors to stay one step ahead of it—masterless men and women are poised to recognize emerging socioeconomic relations or develop new practices that fall outside the mimicry and enclosed world of their “betters.”

The book begins in the 1620s, a period that witnessed a crippling depression and literature rife with depictions of vagabonds. Chapter 1 considers how the circulation of printed news challenges state hegemony; newsheets, because they serve as metonyms for travelers, migrants, and vagabonds, enable the English to work through fears of cross-cultural contact. Ben Jonson’s *The Staple of News*, written toward the end of his career, stages a tension to which this book will repeatedly return. On the one hand, the play marvels at how masterless men, former servants, and part-time poets revel in the chance to reorder social relations through the versatility and contingency of newsheets. On the other, it registers with some alarm how masterless men immediately seize on these newsheets’ potential. Conditioned to roam the streets and responsive to opportunities, the poor seem adept at generating information and circulating it within existing and new networks. Information exchange, then, is already embedded in these communities, and increased mobility and access introduce, Jonson fears, new vulnerabilities to the Crown. Richard Brome, Jonson’s apprentice, engages with some of these same questions of contested power and identity in *The English Moore* (1640). Brome, in particular, embellishes the racial dimensions of the news and its cognate form of circulating coins—their uncertain origins and exposure to different climes.

Chapter 2 also considers London life; instead of the news restructuring social relationships, Richard Brome depicts how masterless men and the working poor seize or maintain power by controlling the changing urban space in *The Weeding of Covent Garden* (1633). In *The Sparagus Garden* (1635), Brome shows how the Netherlands’ industrious nation building haunts English efforts. Perched on the edge of Europe like a mollusk on the edge of a pier, as Andrew Marvell would later write, the Netherlands seems like a dubious example for England. Yet the Netherlands’ practice of claiming new land from the sea, and thereby

establishing a land free from symbolic resonances, presents an ideal settler and colonial model. As the English state claims land from fens or reclaims it by gentrification, it gestures at the Netherlands, which has fostered a stable home despite its cosmopolitan reputation and the wealth it has accrued abroad through its “practice” at settling the metropole. Yet Brome pays attention to the mountebanks and other masterless men displaced by these large-scale projects. Brome, therefore, grapples with how the Dutch economic “miracle” affects English social relations. I then turn to his *A Jovial Crew* (1642), widening the environments analyzed in this book as well as beginning a discussion of the growing divide between the ways in which the elite and under-class experience the world.

Chapter 3 analyzes how Aphra Behn’s dramas, like Brome’s *A Jovial Crew*, underscore how the theater can dispel England’s lingering malaise. England is adrift as it transitions from Stuart authoritarian rule. She observes how the growing divide among English worldviews becomes insuperable: Royalists lament treasonous factionalism, while Parliamentarians welcome a more equitable distribution of power (as Andrew Marvell depicts when he writes that Cromwell was “Founding a firm state by proportions true”).³³ While Behn certainly hardens the former view in some of her plays, she also attempts to lay the groundwork for the exchange of ideas and thoughtful speech in *The Rover or the Banish’d Cavaliers* (1677) and *The City Heiress* (1680). Specifically I argue that in these plays women rescue men from either a slavish devotion to party ideology or an escapist attitude that threatens to marginalize Tory politics. This chapter, like the previous, demonstrates women’s keen sensibility to the tenets of English economic and political systems; in this section, however, the women endeavor to rebind the men to the natural order, the lynchpin of Royalism. Robert Markley contrasts Royalist ideology, which “privileg[es] natural desire,” to Whiggish axioms, “socially conceived and socially contested rights.”³⁴ That is, sexual expression that flouts customs and “natural” allegiance to a divinely sanctioned monarch, among other behaviors, characterizes Tory ideology, while laws that guarantee rights (usually, however, these “rights” merely shift power and do not address systemic socioeconomic prob-

lems, as Royalists would argue) illustrate Whig notions of individualism and governmental policy. The problem Behn identifies is that her Tory characters are performing as Royalists; they have internalized the script, but their desires do not seem to stem from natural impulses and thus undermine Royalist claims to power. Acting as a Royalist, in short, too closely resembles “socially conceived” performativity.

Throughout her career Behn, a fierce proponent of Royalist values, laments the decline of the Stuarts, but through her plays she proposes a series of novel solutions to the Tories’ struggles, including privileging “indigenous worldviews . . . to reinforce Royalist political and cultural authority.”³⁵ Unlike some of her other works, in particular her play *The Roundheads: Or, the Good Old Cause* (1680), *The City Heiress* is not interested in rehashing Puritan-Cavalier struggles or harking back to the War of the Three Kingdoms. While the play is written during the Popish Plot and satirizes Lord Shaftesbury, Behn also laments English susceptibility to perceiving the world through existing frameworks. Her aim is not to show the superiority of Tory ideology but to reanimate it. Moreover, she realizes that when the playhouse merely disseminates (Tory) propaganda, it does not use its potential to change English social life. Theatricalizations in, for example, *The Rover* not only appeal to the women Willmore, the title character, encounters, but they also allow him to transcend his material existence. The problem, however, is that he never reconciles these new sensations with experiential reality. For example, his commanding officer, Colonel Belville, repeatedly points out how he flits through life without registering his surroundings, such as his natty breaches or fetid smell—“real life.” While neither Angellica nor Hellena manage to reorient Willmore, Lady Galliard, in *The City Heiress*, is instrumental in forcing the men to apply theatrical modes to improving English social conditions. That is, when Tom Wilding eschews patriarchal codes and marriage to enjoy heightened experiences with Lady Galliard, the relationship only notionally challenges these codes. She forces the men to reconcile—to “keep you honest to your word”—theatrical and “real” English social life.³⁶

In Chapter 4, I turn to the turn-of-the-century playwright George Farquhar. I describe how military recruitment provides another weapon

against the working poor and masterless men during a time of geopolitical instability. In *The Recruiting Officer* (1706), Captain Plume and his sergeant, Kite, visit Shrewsbury to gain fresh recruits after the Duke of Marlborough's successful military campaigns on the Continent. While the play shows how recruitment extends the war zone into the countryside, the poor and women prove to be a formidable obstacle to limit the routinization of war. Indeed, Kite, for example, explains to a potential recruit that a Ravelin is "like a modern minc'd Pye, but the Crust is confounded hard, and the Plumbs are somewhat hard of Digestion!"³⁷ While recruiters align with the landed gentry to incorporate war into the most quotidian activities, the poor attempt to repulse the ways in which war-making reorders social relations. This chapter specifically engages with the master trope in Farquhar's plays: air. Sir Harry Wildair, one of the most beloved characters in English history, is characterized by his airy disposition in *The Constant Couple* (1699).³⁸ Yet in *The Recruiting Officer* elite airs are extended to the lower orders. Villagers and women sense the emptiness of these gestures. Recruiters' guile, in fact, falls on deaf ears as the villagers treat Kite as a mountebank; when, for example, Kite gives the "Mob" a Grenadiers cap that signals elite status, they respond, "It smells woundily of Sweat and Brimstone."³⁹ The wordplay combining a common epithet and physical injuries as well as metonyms for work and hell signal that the confusion of the warzone amplifies the harsh conditions they are familiar with as day laborers. War does not provide increased opportunities; it reinforces their subjugation.

The Recruiting Officer centers on the tension between two cousins, Melinda and Silvia. On the one hand, Melinda may be captivated by modernization, but she registers the adverse changes Plume's "Recruiting Airs" introduce into the town.⁴⁰ On the other, Silvia leagues with Plume to alter the socioeconomic life of Shrewsbury's denizens. Yet she finally apprehends the devastation of Shrewsbury after she cross dresses as "Jack Wilfull," a vagrant with "neither Home, nor Habitation beyond this spot of Ground."⁴¹ While in disguise, she bravely challenges the men when Plume usurps the town's legal system and impresses men into the military who are vital to the community.

Chapter 5 centers on Daniel Defoe's depiction of the plague of 1665–66 in *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722). I discuss how Defoe appropriates the potential of itinerant groups as they defy orders to limit their mobility. At the heart of the historical fiction, H.F., the narrator, commemorates two brothers and their friend, refugees from the plague-stricken city who travel the countryside. His story institutionalizes and modernizes vagabonds in the sense that their mobility provides the only antidote, as it were, to this contagious disease and the paralysis and fear it occasions. Defoe depicts the plague as a force that unmasks the court and wealthy citizens of London because neither was essential to effecting the recovery of London and setting it on its trajectory as a bustling capital. The text presents a fundamental problem in that it exposes how widespread economic exchanges and increased opportunities for employment can be destructive to the social order at times of crises. The very exchanges that form the bedrock of commercial expansion depopulate London and produce disorder: "Money prevail'd with the poor Men, and many Families found Means to make Salleys out, and escape that way after they had been shut up."⁴² The plague enables the poor to obtain gainful employment, yet Defoe repeatedly confronts anxieties about these new entrants into the middling sort, especially because Londoners represent them as scapegoats for a panicked city.

Defoe introduces an overtly fictional story in order to valorize the efforts of the urban underclass to rebind the city and the country and keep intact the commercial pathways of the nation. He depicts a troupe of two brothers, their kinsman, and a nameless contingent of working poor who echo the traveling collectives of England's past. This collective, too, tries to both capitalize on the energies of and sanitize the mountebanks, thieves, and masterless men whom H.F. encounters in London. As Ruth Perry reminds us of what Walter Ong "calls the 'lifeworld of the oral/aural past'—an environment, in the city at least, of street cries and rhymes, bells ringing and chants, work songs and lullabies"—London life gained much of its vibrancy and industry from the London underclass.⁴³ While Defoe, too, contains the threats of insurrection in *A Journal*, the plague provides an opportunity to graft the lifeworld of its itinerant subjects to the city's commercial expansion. He represents

the two brothers as establishing order, berating country officials who succumb to hysteria, and reinforcing the centrality of London.

In Chapter 6 I conclude with emerging threats to women and the urban underclass, including, as Kathryn King points out, “the lust of acquisition crafted by the seeming ‘magic’ of credit, speculation, paper wealth and other mechanisms of the financial revolution”—and the novel.⁴⁴ The rise of the novel, as Georg Lukács points out in *The Theory of the Novel*, is intimately tied to capitalist logic; like capitalist systems, which structure relationships among things and not people, the novel serves as an “estrangement from an estrangement,” to use an apt phrase from Michael McKeon.⁴⁵ That is, it makes sense of a social construction and therefore naturalizes the repressive socioeconomic conditions for the poor and women. Eliza Haywood’s work, poised on the threshold between romance and the novel, explores these momentous formal and socioeconomic changes. Haywood, as Catherine Ingrassia points out, draws her characters from the teeming city parishes: “Her female subjects are frequently the daughters of bankers, merchants, or aldermen: individuals of the middling classes consistently located in the socio-economic and often geographical milieu of the City of London.”⁴⁶ Haywood’s prose fiction work, *The British Recluse*, in fact seems to contain a metacommentary on both genres: a romance recounting the travails of Cleomira, the recluse, and a novel celebrating the agential Belinda. I argue that while Belinda occupies a vantage point that can manipulate the dashing and predatory but passé Lysander, she loses the bodily and emotional pleasure that characterizes her forbears. This book, in short, argues that women and the urban underclass not only apprehend the large-scale socioeconomic processes that convulse the nation in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, but also they do so while widening economic opportunities and remaining attuned to their surroundings. Thomas, after all, a poor laborer in Farquhar’s *The Recruiting Officer*, exclaims, “The wonderful works of nature!” upon beholding coins engraved with the Queen’s likeness.⁴⁷ As I will argue, the contagious enthusiasm of Thomas bespeaks how the working poor and women appreciate the varied and surprising forms of natural and human expression.

As she gains power, Belinda, however, experiences a diminishment of pleasure—at least as compared to Cleomira, a woman “stuck” in romance. The frame story, describing a landlady whose boarding establishment operates as the temporary refuge for discarded women, repeatedly laments the onset of the novel and remains fascinated by the limitless potential of the romance. I claim that the new genre, the novel, effectively suspends the explorations inherent in the genres I have discussed: drama, romance, and historical fiction. The first five chapters analyze representations that unmasked naturalized hierarchies and revealed a structural underpinning of society constituted by the lower orders. The novel displaces these explorations into an escapist sphere that renders it increasingly difficult to access the natural states that characterize vagabonds, outcasts, and other masterless peoples—the very conditions that epitomize their allure and appeal.