“Dance and Make Revels”: Cross-Dressing Prostitutes and Gendered Performance as a Method of Accessing Agency in Medieval London

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Abstract

Did prostitutes in medieval London have agency? This paper examines a new transcription of a medieval chancery bill concerning a woman accused of dressing in men's clothing and attempting to seduce a merchant at Hanse precinct in London. Rather than assessing this accusation as a potential expression of identity, this paper assesses Joan White's use of male clothing as a method of asserting limited agency over the lived experience of a medieval prostitute. By drawing on the work of Veronica Franco, another medieval courtesan, whose writings also suggest that she was accessing a certain type of agency, this article posits that while participants in the medieval sex trade did not necessarily have agency, they were able to access an "economy of makeshift" through which they could create limited facets of agency for themselves.

Keywords: History, Prostitution, Medieval London, Economy of Makeshift, Agency, gender, sex work, gender expression, chancery bill, sex trade

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In the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century, a prostitute named Joan White offered her services to the German merchant Herman Ryng. The encounter with Ryng was mentioned in passing in bill C 1/158/47 – a case from London's Chancery Court. According to the bill, White encountered him in the steelyard, the Hanse merchants' precinct in London, where she presented herself to Ryng and informed him that at her master's house, she "was wont to dance and make revels…sometimes naked and sometimes in mens' clothing."[1] In this bill, Ryng also explains that he had White whipped for her boldness. In response, White's master Stephan Reygate charged Ryng with trespass, probably because the injuries he inflicted on White kept her from bringing in money for Reygate's brothel.[2] The vast majority of the document is devoted to Ryng's belief that he had been wrongly accused and fined by Stephan Reygate. The bill itself reinforces stereotypes of medieval masculinity. Although Ryng was a well-known individual in London, notorious for various sexual indiscretions with both prostitutes and married women, it was Joan White's actions that he depicts as reprehensible.[3] Her loss of earning potential as a sex worker was perceived to be a greater crime than any physical harm she might have suffered. Further, this loss of earning potential was portrayed as injurious to her master, not to White herself. A cursory glance over the text would lead the reader to believe the story the bill tells is only about Ryng and Reygate: Joan White is mentioned only once by name, and disappears entirely from the narrative after the seventh line of the bill.[4] However, her brief appearance in Ryng's defense presents the reader with a category of unusual behaviour amongst medieval prostitutes: cross-dressing. This behaviour can be difficult to engage with, particularly in a history of sexuality that some twentieth-century historians have argued did not exist, in any meaningful way, in premodern Europe.[5] Jonathan Goldberg, a scholar of same-sex eroticism in the Renaissance, goes so far as to say that "to speak of sexuality in the [medieval] period is a misnomer…[because] if sexuality is taken as a marker of identity, definitional of a core of the person."[6] Discourses such as Goldberg's risk making presentist assumptions. As Ruth Mazo Karras argues in "Sex, Money, and Prostitution in Medieval English Culture," when scholars study histories of sexuality, they can risk imposing modern categories on the past.[7] The imposition of this logic, she explains, can lead academics to the conclusion that based on current understandings, a single historical definition of sexuality exists.[8] Under this single definition, premodern sexualities become opposed to modern ones, and therefore can be dismissed as something other than sexuality: White, for example, might be categorized as an individual cross-dressing to express a gendered identity, which is a purely modern understanding of why people wear clothes belonging to the opposite sex.[9] To properly frame White's crossdressing, therefore, we must step back from twentieth-century notions of what it means to cross-dress. Scholarly framing of the history of sexuality as nonexistent unless it somehow involved an 'identity' risks sidelining important aspects of sexual behaviour that could have been taken on for reasons other than individualism and self-expression. This was likely not

[1] Judith M. Bennett and Shannon McSheffrey, "Early, Erotic and Alien: Women Dressed as Men in Late Medieval London," History Workshop Journal, no. 77 (2014), 9; C 1/158/47, The National Archives.

[2] Teresa Phipps, "Misbehaving Women: Trespass and Honour in Late Medieval English Towns," Historical Reflections 43, no. 1 (2017): 62–76; C 1/158/47, The National Archives.

[3] Bennett and McSheffrey, "Early, Erotic and Alien," 9.

[4] C 1/158/47, The National Archives.

[5] Jonathan Goldberg, ed., Queering the Renaissance, Series Q (Duke University Press, 1994); David M. Halperin, "Is There a History of Sexuality?," History and Theory 28, no. 3 (1989): 257–74, https://doi.org/10.2307/2505179; Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero, eds., Premodern Sexualities (New York: Routledge, 2013), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315811529.

[6] Goldberg, Queering the Renaissance, 5.

[7] Ruth Mazo Karras, "Sex, Money, and Prostitution in Medieval English Culture," in Desire and Discipline: Sex and Sexuality in the Premodern West, ed. Konrad Eisenbichler and Jacqueline Murray (University of Toronto Press, 1996), 201–16, https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442673854-012.

[8] Karras.

[9] Karras.

the case in medieval London.[10] However, Joan White's assertion that she habitually dressed in clothes belonging to the other sex, presumably in front of an audience, prompts questions about how prostitutes enacted their gender and sexuality, as well as what might have led them to perform gendered stereotypes in certain ways.[11] We must read between the lines to understand her experience, as the marginality in the records forces much of the historian's construction of that experience to be based on speculation. This paper will not construct medieval prostitution or cross-dressing as an "identity" because to do so would risk falling into a trap outlined by Mazo Karras and many others: the concept of 'sexual identity' is a purely modern notion.[12] Rather, it will take on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's more relevant theory of "instability rather than fixity" of sexual expression and how this instability led women like White to have access to a certain level of agency.[13] Kosofsky Sedgwick explains this "as an issue of *continuing*, determinative importance in the lives of people across a spectrum of sexualities."[14] This definition allows us to shift from discussions of a fixed identity to a more fluid understanding of how sexual expressions and deviances change for a wide variety of social and individual factors. Prostitutes like Joan White invite us to consider the fluidity of behaviour and performance within a profession with little inherent agency. Examining White's case and her advertisements that she "dance[d]…sometimes in men's clothing," we can see that rather than reflecting a modern notion of sexual identity, her gendered performance exemplifies a broader "economy of makeshift" within medieval society, where both men and women strategically navigated social expectations and power structures through fluid expressions of gender to achieve greater agency and control over their circumstances.[15]

Contextualizing Bill C 1/185/47 Within Medieval London and the Court of Chancery

In their 2014 overview of women dressed as men in late medieval London, Bennett and McSheffrey briefly discuss Joan White's crossdressing. They reveal that Joan White and her master were presented by Herman Ryng as immoral and disorderly individuals. However, this characterization was due to their boldness in approaching Ryng in the steelyard and consequent litigation after White was injured.[16] Ryng took no issue with Joan White's cross-dressing, at least not in the context of his suit, though this may have to do with the nature of his complaint and the court to which it was directed, rather than a tolerance for White's behaviour. Bill C 1/158/47 was presented in the Court of Chancery, a court meant specifically for the judgement of complaints by the chancellor.[17]

[10] Karras.

[11] Joan White's case occurred at the beginning of the Early Modern period, a time when the changing social and economic landscape—especially for women—likely influenced various aspects of her life. While this article does not focus on these broader changes, readers may benefit from understanding the wider context.. See Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, Women in Early Modern England 1550–1720 (Oxford University Press, 1998), https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198201243.001.0001; Merry E. Wiesner, Early Modern Europe, 1450-1789 (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[12] Karras, "Sex, Money, and Prostitution in Medieval English Culture"; Jeffrey Weeks, "Discourse, Desire and Sexual Deviance: Some Problems in a History of Homosexuality," in Culture, Society and Sexuality, ed. Richard Parker and Peter Aggleton (London: Routledge, 2006).

[13] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Epistemology of the Closet (University of California Press, 2008); Karras, "Sex, Money, and Prostitution in Medieval English Culture." Note that Kosofsky Sedgwick did not apply this theory outside of queer sexualities; however, Sedgwick's discussion of shifting understandings of what 'sexual identities' consisted of makes it relevant to this discussion.

[14] Sedgwick, Epistemology of the Closet, 1 (emphasis added).

[15] C 1/158/47.

[16] Bennett and McSheffrey, "Early, Erotic and Alien," 9.

[17] Timothy S. Haskett, "The Medieval English Court of Chancery," Law and History Review 14, no. 2 (1996), 251.

In the legally pluralistic setting of medieval England, the Court of Chancery was often used to attend to day-to-day matters or those not deemed serious enough to take to the king's court.[18] Litigants also might have chosen to pursue a matter through multiple courts, hoping for a just ruling through at least one of them.[19] However, the Court of Chancery – known colloquially as the 'court of conscience' – was often the most straightforward and sympathetic to more quotidian plights.[20] The procedural formalities of common law did not bind the chancellor, and the process of submitting a complaint to the Court of Chancery was relatively informal, as were the proceedings.[21] The chancellor's judgements were meant to be based on a conscience-guided, moralistic approach to what was right or wrong, not directed by the formal laws of the king's court.[22] Therefore, Chancery often served as a catch-all for cases that would not have held up under the rigours of other courts, such as in matters for which there was little evidence, and for which fault was a matter of conscience instead of fact.[23] Ryng's complaint was precisely this: he accused Reygate, White's master, of stacking the jury against him, and contended that the fines he was asked to pay were unreasonable.[24] He called Reygate a "needy man and cumbrous to deal with," and stated that Joan was a "misliving woman," meaning that she was sinful.[25] To his charges, Ryng claimed that "[Reygate] and others of his affinity to whom [he was] neighbours" made up the jury, and convicted him in "great prejudice."[26] Concrete proof for this claim was non-existent, or, at least, not detailed in the accusation. Rather, Ryng sought to construct both White and Reygate as deeply disordered individuals by characterizing his experiences of them with an undercurrent of gendered and socialized disarray. This characterization presumably was intended to sway the chancellor to rule in his favour on the grounds that Reygate was an unreliable narrator and prone to untrustworthy behaviour.

Joan White was a somewhat extraneous character in this narrative. Ryng included her only to demonstrate her boldness and to underscore the disordered house of her master. However, the context of her claims – to "dance and make revels…sometimes in mens' clothing," – speak to a non-normative aspect of the gendered behaviour of the prostitute in medieval London.[27] Previously, this behaviour has been presented through a presentist lens that implies that prostitutes, or people who cross-dressed in general, were doing so to be transgressive, and caused a gendered social panic in medieval society.[28] Jean Howard makes claims to this effect, suggesting that an upheaval in the semiotics of gendered performance in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century meant that the patriarchal system was facing uncertain times.[29] What she termed as a "gender struggle" was underscored by the homoeroticism of dressing male actors effeminately, and points to an imbalance and fear experienced by a patriarchal society at this

[18] Cordelia Beattie, "A Piece of the Puzzle: Women and the Law as Viewed from the Late Medieval Court of Chancery," Journal of British Studies 58, no. 4 (October 2019): 751–67, https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2019.87; Haskett, "The Medieval English Court of Chancery."

[19] Beattie, "A Piece of the Puzzle."

[20] Dennis R. Klinck, Conscience, Equity and the Court of Chancery in Early Modern England (London: Routledge, 2016), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315573465.

[21] Haskett, 252.

[22] Klinck, Conscience, Equity and the Court of Chancery in Early Modern England.

[23] Haskett, 252.

[24] C 1/158/47, The National Archives.

[25] C 1/158/47.

[26] C 1/158/47.

[27] C 1/158/47.

[28] See discussion of such presentations in David Cressy, "Gender Trouble and Cross-Dressing in Early Modern England," The Journal of British Studies 35, no. 4 (1996), 442-45.

[29] Jean E. Howard, "Crossdressing, The Theatre, and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England," Shakespeare Quarterly 39, no. 4 (1988): 418–40, https://doi.org/10.2307/2870706.

intrusion into their normative behaviour.[30] Howard's characterization of cross-dressers implies an identity-based struggle to push back against an unseen oppressor, with a single, binding cause.[31] This approach is steeped in modern notions of the troubled 'queer' minority, and may have been informed by a desire to overthrow oppressive forces. However, her argument idealizes medieval subjects, attempting to fit their lived experiences into modern frameworks. Real individuals who cross-dressed in medieval England were not necessarily oppressed, nor were they necessarily engaged in any outward revolt.[32] In "Early, Erotic, and Alien," Bennett and McSheffrey investigate individual cases of cross-dressing, and show that although these behaviours were inherently eroticized, they were not necessarily considered transgressive or deemed worthy of panic.[33] In fact, in many cases, cross-dressing was desirable. The physical nature of men's clothing meant that donning it allowed women to display their bodies in ways that long dresses and skirts did not.[34] Women dressing as men also presented a level of mystique to the male viewer. In the same ways that prostitutes would put on accents, or pretend to originate from exotic locales, male dress gave them a way to present themselves as mysterious, unique and therefore more desirable.[35] This explanation is more plausible than Howard's hypothesis of an identity-based panic. Additionally, Bennett and McSheffrey adeptly incorporate the Kosofsky Sedgwick's fluctuating nature of sexualities into their analysis of cross-dressing in "Early, Erotic, and Alien." They interpret cross-dressing through a lens of the time, considering the economy, necessities, and lived experience of sex workers. They argue that sex workers were not women seeking to start a sexual revolution. Rather, it seems more likely that they were looking to outdo their competitors by offering a more exotic, more daring, and more alluring presentation than the other women in their proximity.

Allure and exoticism were likely part of the appeal of a female sex worker dressed in male clothing. Joan White's case, though, allows us to speculate more deeply about the relationship between prostitutes and their male clothes. Male viewers are still central to much of the academic discussion about medieval female cross-dressing.[36] Just as Joan White existed as a subtext in a male-dominated narrative, so too does cross-dressing and other forms of gender subversion in the academic discussion surrounding it. A more well-known prostitute than White, John/Eleanor Rykener, also suffered from this imbalance of representation. Rykener's case has several key differences – mainly that he was biologically male, and appeared to live his life as a woman alongside conducting sexual activities as one.[37] However, Rykener's propensity to solicit sex while dressed as a woman has been explored at great length in terms of his relationships with male clients.[38] Rykener's own

[30] Howard, 418-419.
[31] Howard; Cressy, "Gender Trouble and Cross-Dressing in Early Modern England."
[32] Cressy, 445.
[33] Bennett and McSheffrey, "Early, Erotic and Alien," 4.
[34] Bennett and McSheffrey.
[35] Bennett and McSheffrey, 14.
[36] See discussions of male-dominated interpretations in cases of both male and female cross-dressing in Cressy, "Gender Trouble and Cross-Dressing in Early Modern England"; Bennett and McSheffrey, "Early, Erotic and Alien"; Sandra Lowerre (Bochum), "To Rise Beyond Their Sex: Female Cross-Dressing Saints in Caxton's Vitas Patrum," in Riddles, Knights and Cross-Dressing Saints, ed. Thomas Honegger (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004); Isaac Bershady, "Sexual Deviancy and Deviant Sexuality in Medieval England," Primary Source 5, no. 1 (2014).
[37] Ruth Mazo Karras and David Lorenzo Boyd, "'Ut Cum Muliere': A Male Transvestite Prostitute in Fourteenth-Century London," in Premodern Sexualities, ed. Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero (New York: Routledge, 1996).
[38] Jeremy Goldberg, "John Rykener, Richard II and the Governance of London," Leeds Studies in English 4 (2014); Judith M. Bennett, "England: Women and Gender," in A Companion to Britain in the Later Middle Ages, ed. S.H. Rigby (Malden: Blackwell, 2003), 87–106; Carolyn Dinshaw, "Good Vibrations: John/Eleanor, Dame Alys, the Pardoner, and Foucault," in Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 102–42; Ruth Evans, "The Production of Space in Chaucer's London," in Chaucer and the City, ed. Ardis Butterfield (Cambridge: D.S.

words appear in the scholarship, but they are used within the context of the construction of an identity that was based on his interactions with men while dressed in women's clothes. Rykener's female conquests receive far less attention, or are used as proof of his "bisexuality."[39] Further, the court was concerned with the disruption Rykener caused by *becoming* a woman through his actions and state of dress.[40] Rykener's acquisition of femininity was, in itself, a position that eroticized him to his male clients – similar to how White's acquisition of masculinity aroused her own male audiences.[41] Viewing these individuals through a male-focused gaze places cross-dressing as inherently arousing. But for women like Joan, cross-dressing presented them with a choice about how they utilized their gender, sometimes in unexpected ways, to create more acceptable encounters, or at least less vulnerable ones. Because Bill C 1/158/47 gives us so little context about Joan White, we must use sources about other sex workers to craft a potential narrative of how White might have experienced dressing in men's clothing.[42] As we do so, we must also recognize that women working as prostitutes did not experience agency, at least not in the same way that a modern reader might define it.[43] Medieval prostitutes were not a monolithic group. Their diverse set of experiences and modes of operating both within and outside the law make it difficult to characterize their social standing. Yet, the nature of their trade allowed them to utilize an "economy of makeshift," to create a gendered method of operating within the confines of their profession. This economy of makeshift likely gave them greater levels of autonomy than they otherwise might have been granted.[44]

"The Economy of Makeshift:" Performing Gender as a Form of Agency in Medieval Europe

To discuss how female prostitutes used their gender to exercise agency, we must first define the concept of the "economy of makeshift." This concept has been well-developed, used to describe everything from the French working-class economy to tackling homelessness, poverty, and the consequences of deindustrialization in modern cities.[45] The economy

Brewer, 2006), 41–56; Tom Linkinen, Same Sex Sexuality in Later Medieval Culture (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014); Robert Mills, Seeing Sodomy in the Middle Ages (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); Karras and Boyd, "'Ut Cum Muliere.'"

[39] Karras and Boyd, "'Ut Cum Muliere.'"

[40] Karras and Boyd, 109.

[41] Karras and Boyd, 109.

[42] To some degree, drawing on external experiences to craft this narrative requires a reliance on speculation. Such is the nature of engaging with a discipline where there is often very little or fragmented primary evidence. However, it also remains to be acknowledged that there are differences between Joan White and the other women discussed here – both in class, geographical location, and sexual practices. Rather than attempt to construct a mirror of White's life, this paper draws on aspects of other women's experiences to illustrate what she might have experienced and thought.

[43] Ruth Mazo Karras, Common Women: Prostitution and Sexuality in Medieval England (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 65.

[44] For further discussion of the "economy of makeshift," see Alannah Tomkins and Steven King, eds., The Poor in England: 1700-1850 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).

[45] Kim Hopper, Ezra Susser, and Sarah Conover, "Economies of Makeshift: Deindustrialization and Homelessness In New York Ctiy," Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development 14, no. 1/3 (1985): 183–236; Jennine Hurl-Eamon, "The Fiction of Female Dependence and the Makeshift Economy of Soldiers, Sailors, and Their Wives in Eighteenth-Century London," Labor History 49, no. 4 (November 1, 2008): 481–501, https://doi.org/10.1080/00236560802376987; Matthew Roberts, "Rural Luddism and the Makeshift Economy of the Nottinghamshire Framework Knitters," Social History 42, no. 3 (July 3, 2017): 365–98, https://doi.org/10.1080/03071022.2017.1327644; Alexander Vasudevan, "The Makeshift City: Towards a Global Geography of Squatting," Progress in Human Geography 39, no. 3 (June 1, 2015): 338–59, https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132514531471.

of makeshift has often served as a socio-historical methodology for investigating society's underserved and disadvantaged. In this way, it can frame the movement and resourcefulness of people in and out of professions and locations due to their economic difficulties or marginal experiences.[46] In Joan White's case, we may interpret this movement and resourcefulness as her employment of gendered behaviours and dress to eroticize, but also to protect herself, from clients. She, and other women like her, employed a wide variety of gendered tactics to exploit a hierarchy in which they were otherwise disadvantaged. Because women were more harshly regulated in medieval culture than men, they developed an understanding of how to work regulations and expectations to their advantage, thus creating an economy of makeshift wherein they moved between and performed genders in many ways, and employed resourcefulness to acquire variety of beneficial results.[47] To Ryng, Joan White's performance was likely one such use of her own economy of makeshift. What might be construed as boldness in her declaration that she often danced naked or in men's clothing could also be understood as a clever manipulation of the male desire to see a woman's body either completely unclothed or in form-fitting clothes. While it is unclear if such practices were common, Joan White clearly captured Ryng's attention, though likely not in the way she had intended. Had Ryng been less inclined to violence, White could just have easily found herself a client. Her decision to advertise her services in such a way could also been a method of accessing power and protection, a theory that will be discussed later in this paper. The intentionality behind White's offer of her services suggests that she was aware of what she was doing and that she had had some success with this method in the past. By performing her gender in a variety of ways as both a nude woman and a woman dressed as a man, White was able to attract attention and clientele who might otherwise have been uninterested.

Joan White was not the only woman who operated in this way. Extremely powerful and highly sought-after, the Venetian courtesan Veronica Franco produced an impressive amount of literature on her sexual and emotional experiences over the course of her life.[48] While her power over her clientele sets her apart from Joan White, Franco likely learned much of her trade from her mother, who was also a sex worker, and raised Veronica and her sisters in poverty.[49] Therefore, it is not unlikely that aspects of her approach mirrored the lower-class prostitutes around whom she had been raised. Impressively, however, Veronica Franco became a prolific author, poet, and courtesan.[50] Her extensive literary work gives us a glimpse into how she saw herself and her profession. Two of her earlier poems in particular, *Terze rime* 1 and 2, tell us more about how other women in the sex trade might have performed their gender in varied ways to influence the outcome of interactions with their clients.[51] In the poems, Veronica Franco conversed with a man who wanted her to take him as a lover.[52] He called her cruel for rejecting him, and described his desire for her with strikingly aggressive language: "how sweet to assail you! and in that way to strip you of any retreat or defense!."[53] The male poet tried to manipulate Franco, giving her the illusion of choice in how their encounter will occur, even though he clearly defined the terms of both of the choices he offered her.[54] Clearly, the male poet believed he had the power in the interaction. When Franco responded, though, the reader's perception of power is shifted. Her wording was uncertain, almost tentative, exhorting to the man's supposed control: "I

[46] Tomkins and King, 13.
[47] Carolyn Dinshaw, Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern (Duke University Press, 1999), 111.
[48] Marilyn Migiel, Veronica Franco in Dialogue (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022), 3-4.
[49] Margaret F. Rosenthal, The Honest Courtesan: Veronica Franco, Citizen and Writer in Sixteenth-Century Venice (University of Chicago Press, 2012), vii.
[50] Rosenthal, vii.
[51] Migiel, 22.
[52] Migiel.
[53] Migiel, 22-24.
[54] Migiel, 26.

yearn to have cause to love you: take the side that you like, for everything depends upon your will."[55] However, her vulnerability was intentional. The uncertain language leaves the reader feeling unstable, probably similar to how her male counterpart would have felt at her response.[56] She centred the mutuality and reciprocity of the experiences between the two poets, and on connection in a way that the male poet does not.[57] By doing so, she dislodged the single-minded focus of her male partner, placing him on uncertain ground through the use of gestures considered effeminate, such as linguistic manipulation and a focus on human connection as opposed to logic. Franco employed highly gendered strategies to turn the focus away from the man's aggression, and towards a mutual connection that, to her, felt safer. While Veronica Franco's interpretation of the gendered economy of makeshift was more complex than Joan White's crossdressing, the basic principle was the same: both used stereotypes of their gender to perform and gain something for themselves. They used these performances as a way of exercising agency, of guaranteeing a better outcome for themselves – and doubtless, they are performances. The calculated use of specific gendered categories suggests thought-out production of specific types of behaviour, ones meant to serve a purpose. Furthermore, White's and Franco's performances and use of ingenuity for gain was not uncommon in the broader context of medieval society. These women were not operating outside of social norms, but rather they were using a well-known strategy in male-dominated spheres that they took, restructured, and made their own.

White, Franco, and many other women like them used the social tools available to them to craft a performance of femininity or masculinity that brought them desirous results. To establish an improved framework of how gendered performance worked in medieval circles, we must briefly circle away from medieval femininities and enter the distinctly masculinized space of law and the court. In a social history concerning the employment of gendered behaviours by men in medieval courts, medieval scholar Derek Neal offers us a broader perspective of the ways gender was performed for purpose in a variety of social systems during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.[58] Neal presents a set of court evidence from fifteenth-century courts that calls into question the frequently cited sharp divides between spheres of masculinity and femininity in the medieval context.[59] Rather than adhering to strictly-administered gendered norms, the men in these documents also employed both masculine and feminine performances when they believed it would result in a desirable outcome to their case.[60] In one particular scheme, William de Malton, a man from York, attempted to dodge charges of horse theft by assigning a very specific set of roles played by both him and his wife Matilda.[61] Crime and litigation – which Derek Neal argues were, at their roots, issues of masculinity – occupied the male sphere.[62] Defense of honour and honesty were signifiers of the "true man."[63] To be dishonest, or to shirk accepting responsibility for one's actions, therefore, were feminine attributes. Particularly in the case of property crimes, which were among the most serious, one's masculinity and honour were often what were

[55] Migiel, 71.
[56] Migiel, 31.
[57] Migiel, 33.
[58] Derek Neal, "Suits Make the Man: Masculinity in Two English Law Courts, C.1500," Canadian Journal of History 37, no. 1 (2022): 1–22.
[59] See Neal, 8; Karma Lochrie, "Don't Ask, Don't Tell: Murderous Plots and Medieval Secrets," in Premodern Sexualities, ed. Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero (Routledge, 1996); Jim Casey, "Feeling It Like a Man: Masculine Grief in Medieval and Early Modern Texts," in Grief, Gender, and Identity in the Middle Ages, ed. Lee Templeton, vol. 8, Explorations in Medieval Culture (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2022); Heidi Breuer, Crafting the Witch: Gendering Magic in Medieval and Early Modern England (New York: Routledge, 2009), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203876787; William E. Burgwinkle, Sodomy, Masculinity and Law in Medieval Literature: France and England, 1050–1230 (Cambridge University Press, 2004).
[60] Neal, 8-10.
[61] Neal, 9.
[62] Neal, 12.
[63] Neal.

really on trial.[64] However, in the case of William de Malton and his wife, this masculine posturing was turned on its head. Instead of facing the charges with honesty like a "true man," de Malton pinned the planning and execution of the crime on his wife.[65] He stated that he had only taken the horse with his wife's "advice and express consent," and that she had instructed him on how to remove the horse from the stable.[66] In this case, de Malton was performing aspects of gendered behaviour (gullibility, willingness to be directed) that would have been interpreted as feminine. He behaved abnormally, and thus associated himself with female criminality which "[was] seen in terms of dysfunction, an aberration of the norms of…behaviour."[67] However, he did so with an explicit purpose: to paint his wife as the mastermind of the crime and lessen his own apparent criminality.[68] Similar to Veronica Franco, Joan White, and, surely, many other individuals like them, de Malton was employing aspects of the feminine to improve his chances of a desirable result. In fact, de Malton's tactics were not uncommon. Shannon McSheffrey has also identified performances of gender amongst Italian merchants who overperformed their masculinity in order to shame their English rivals.[69] The performance of gender as an "economy of makeshift" was present not just on the margins of medieval society, but at the very heart of it. Therefore, to assume that women like Joan White were also employing it to their advantage is, at the very least, a reasonable interpretation of the facts.

Protection, Power, Desire: Why Cross-Dress?

Having established that participation in gendered performance was a commonly employed method used by medieval people to improve their circumstances, we can now turn our attention to the specifics of Joan White's case. She occupied a social space that was defined both by marginality and connection to the fabric that made up medieval European society.[70] Prostitutes were often a visible, active part of the population.[71] They reserved the right to exert the gendered performance that, as we have seen, was employed in both marginal and central spaces. For White, donning men's clothing was something she advertised to Herman Ryng; therefore, we can reasonably assume that it was a decision she made consciously for good personal and professional reasons. While her motivations were likely complex beyond what limited sources can tell us, I will present three likely reasons here: protection, power, and desire. With these three categories, I seek to explain the particular case of prostitutes catering to merchants in London, as Joan was, and to demonstrate why these three traits might have been desirable to them.

Most academically developed is the category of desire. Bennett and McSheffrey argue exactly this in "Early, Erotic, and Alien": that women dressed in mens' clothing exposed themselves in ways that female garb simply did not allow.[72] Both literary and legal sources provide a strong basis to make this claim; women in plays, books, and actual women on the streets of London were dressing as men to attract clients with whom they could have sex.[73] Pragmatically, dressing as a man was a good business strategy. It was unusual,

[64] Rosemary Gartner and Bill McCarthy, The Oxford Handbook of Gender, Sex, and Crime (Oxford University Press, 2014), 193.
[65] Neal, 12; Faramerz Dabhoiwala, "The Construction of Honour, Reputation and Status in Late Seventeenth- and Early Eighteenth-Century England," Transactions of the Royal Historical Society 6 (1996), 203-4.
[66] Neal, "Suits Make the Man," 9.
[67] Garthine Walker, Crime, Gender and Social Order in Early Modern England (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 4.
[68] Neal, "Suits Make the Man," 10.
[69] Shannon McSheffrey, "The Legend of John Baptist Grimaldi: Sexual Comportment and Masculine Styles in Early Tudor London," in Patriarchy, Honour, and Violence: Masculinities in Premodern Europe, ed. Jacqueline Murray, Essays and Studies 57 (Toronto: CRRS Publications, 2022), 10–23.
[70] Erik Spindler, "Were Medieval Prostitutes Marginals? Evidence from Sluis, 1387-1440," Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire 87, no. 2 (2009), 243.
[71] Spindler.
[72] Bennett and McSheffrey, "Early, Erotic and Alien," 4.
[73] Bennett and McSheffrey, 9.

revealing, and therefore appealing. Women like Joan White, working near the merchants' precinct, frequently encountered men who would have undergone long sea voyages, likely without the company of women.[74] To see a women dressed as such, her legs revealed (a rare commodity amongst medieval women) would have immediately attracted attention. This gave the woman who was revealing herself a certain amount of power. It allowed her to compete with her fellow prostitutes – and also exist between gender binaries. While no evidence suggests these women were more empowered by their male dress, it is not a difficult association to make. Male dress was a form of currency that made women more desirable, and thus, if one's livelihood relied on desirability, more economically and socially powerful. Women who were willing to expose themselves in such ways likely occupied a different social position from their counterparts who prostituted themselves in female dress, simply because they were more exposed, more visible, and therefore had a better chance of attracting clients.

The third category, protection, is slightly more complex. However, its essence boils down to a simple premise. By her own admission, Joan White danced both in men's clothing and naked while working for Stephan Reygate.[75] If we hypothesize that both nudity and cross-dressing brought in more clientele, we may also surmise that Reygate offered White a choice: dance naked, or wear men's clothing. Of the two options, one would have given White more protection, more of a chance to uphold both her modesty in a public place and prevent wandering hands from accessing her without paying beforehand. In a situation where she had little control over what was done to and with her, dressing in male attire may have allowed Joan White to regain some sense of control over who touched her, saw her, and encountered her sexually. Between the two options, the one that allowed her to remain somewhat covered would have been the safer option. It also might have allowed her to imagine that her honour had not been completely sullied – that the layer of fabric keeping her clients' hands from her skin also kept them from completely taking her virtue. In a situation where there was still a slight barrier between herself and the men who desired her, she might have imagined that she was not, as Herman Ryng put it, a "misliving woman," but rather a woman doing what she needed to in order to protect herself from wandering eyes and hands.

Joan White's case is not straightforward. Her story is woven into a quarrel between two men, and her motives are unclear. However, establishing a social framework for gendered performance as an "economy of makeshift" can help us understand that she was immersed in a society where gendered performance for individual benefit was practiced, and, it seems, accepted. We can also begin to understand why Joan's gendered performance might have benefitted her, both from a financial and personal standpoint. In this light, her cross-dressing does not represent an identity, although there were likely women who felt that way; rather, it represents a method of obtaining and exercising agency and hope in a structure that offered her little.

[74] Richard Goddard, "Female Merchants? Women, Debt, and Trade in Later Medieval England, 1266–1532," Journal of British Studies 58, no. 3 (July 2019): 494–518, https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2019.4.

[75] C 1/158/47, The National Archives.

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