In this essay I compare Christopher Marlowe and Thomas Middleton, focusing on the relations between their representations of human agency and their styles of demystification. The problem of agency in literary studies is a residue of the energetic demystification of the choosing bourgeois self, what Judith Butler calls “the voluntarist subject of humanism,” in the human sciences generally and perhaps especially in literary studies. Broadly speaking, literary criticism used to pride itself on its treatment of selfhood and identity and praised works of literature for their qualified reinforcement of selfhood and provision to the young of mythic instances of human greatness. This still goes on, and in some ways it is reemergent in the new millennium, but the dominant tendency of academic interpretation is now different. Literary criticism prides itself on demystification, and it either praises works of literature for stripping away mystifications from the social order or shows how those works themselves are mystifications that need to be seen through. Individual critics distinguish themselves by being less mystified than their rivals. And the illusory nature of the autonomous choosing self is a particularly important thing not to be mystified about.

Given that the academic prose that scholars write is, for many, their most important form of professional self-assertion and identity formation and that such prose is also an obvious product of discursive systems and is full of formal acknowledgments of particular influences, being demystified about one’s own discursive choices while also seeking individual advancement from them can place one in a somewhat paradoxical position. That is, once I start emphasizing the constructedness

of the subject and priding myself on the rigor with which I approach the subject with a view to deconstructing it, the question, Who is talking?—or alternatively (and perhaps more rigorously) What is talking?—becomes a pressing one. Whence, I suggest, the problem of agency: a kind of shorthand for a set of enabling difficulties, both intellectual and moral, that attend the dominance of demystification in literary studies.

English Renaissance drama has a privileged place in the literary history of human agency, largely because Shakespeare, a great portrayer of the complexity of human action who is also a pioneer in the representation of deep selfhood, wrote for the London public theater and saw human complexity in part through the extraordinarily rich set of patterns offered by that new and rapidly developing institution. Shakespeare stands (or towers) between Marlowe and Middleton in the history of drama—not that he predates his exact contemporary Marlowe but that Shakespeare’s prime as a playwright begins in roughly the year of Marlowe’s murder and extends through the first decade of Middleton’s playwriting career. This essay will suggest that Marlowe and Middleton also bracket Shakespeare by exemplifying two assertive and contrasting modes of demystification in their works: modes that mingle, in less assertive form, in Shakespeare’s.

As I discuss Marlowe and Middleton as demystifiers, suggesting two broad styles or axes of demystification by which their plays might be distinguished, I will also be showing how their plays model meaningful human action. Although this sounds paradoxical, it is not. All systematic accounts of the constructedness of human action and the human social order, once brought to consciousness, both expose some versions of individual autonomy as illusory and provide a map for the successful fulfillment of individual desires.

Many have noted the energy with which Marlowe and Middleton demystify. Paul Yachnin remarks that Middleton “perhaps learned the techniques of skeptical interrogation from Christopher Marlowe,”

and while not everyone would link the two in this way, it is common to value both for the ways they question dignified rationalizations for human acts and desires. It seems to me an open and quite interesting question whether public drama in general should not be regarded as a demystifying activity, one that lays out important public and private processes (king making, perhaps preeminently, but also marriage, inheritance, war, etc.) for examination in ways that are formally less mystified than other ways in which descriptions of such processes were available to the public (such as coronations, sacraments, and homilies). Renaissance drama, and indeed drama in general, by holding such processes up for the approval or disapproval of a miscellaneous audience that buys the privilege of evaluation and the expectation of pleasure, sets the actions it presents in a market that is relatively open. Part of the contract is that these descriptions are peculiarly unprescriptive—unlike homilies or coronations or statutes, they have no force behind them, nor do they invoke large public traditions of reverence or obedience. But even if it is conceded that drama tends toward demystification (mutatis mutandis—masques or pageants being relatively mystifying, with strong affinities to ritual, while history plays are relatively demystifying, with affinities to markets, elections, and parliamentary debate), we need a register of styles of demystification to account for affinities and distinctions among different dramatists and among particular plays. Such a register would have direct bearing on the representation of agency in drama since, as I have suggested,

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3. See, inter alia, Jean-Christophe Agnew, Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1550–1750 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Douglas Bruster, Drama and the Market in the Age of Shakespeare (Cambridge University Press, 1992); Lars Engle, Shakespearean Pragmatism: Market of His Time (University of Chicago Press, 1993). Obviously if one wanted this remark to apply to Athenian theater, one would have to delete “buys the privilege” and emphasize instead the aspect of participating in a formal contest in which a judgment purporting to represent the tribes was rendered.

4. For the purposes of this article, I want to defer another interesting question: whether demystification with respect to residual or dominant social forms inevitably involves mystification with respect to emergent ones. For someone with a pragmatist attitude toward truth, it is hard to claim that any form of social analysis peels away layers of ideology to get at true social structures. At its most progressive, social analysis may be thought to offer more useful (democratic? efficient? liberatory?) descriptions to put in place of less useful ones (aristocratic, economically stultifying, repressive, etc.). The term “demystification” supposes a binary opposition between truth and mystification that pragmatists question.
one can roughly say that the problem of agency, if genuine, is produced by the demystification of a humanist position on the possibilities of human action.

With these considerations in mind, then, I will attempt to develop a general theoretical context in which to contrast Marlowe and Middleton. Each dramatist, I suggest, tends to unmask a quite different underlying system. We can see and differentiate these systems clearly because they have been delineated by modern theorists of desire, Freud and René Girard. In what follows, I contrast a Freudian approach to desire and social behavior that is, broadly speaking, oedipal (focusing on the ways people internalize or cast off traditions) and a Girardian approach that is, broadly speaking, mimetic (focusing on the ways agents pick up desires and habits from their immediate contemporaries and surroundings). My claim is that Marlowe is centrally interested in oedipal desire and that Middleton is centrally interested in mimetic desire. In treating Marlowe, I will touch on *Tamburlaine the Great*, pt. 1 (1587–88), *Doctor Faustus* (1588–89), *Edward II* (1591–93), and *The Jew of Malta* (1589–90); in discussing Middleton, I will analyze *A Trick to Catch the Old One* (1605–6) in some detail and touch on *Women Beware Women* (1620–24?), *The Revenger’s Tragedy* (1606–7), and Middleton and William Rowley’s *The Changeling* (1622).

* * *

The idea of repression and of the unconscious pervades modern thought, political and social as well as psychological. Let us, for argumentative purposes—ignoring the imprecision involved (and deferring issues about gender)—call “oedipal” an understanding of human desire that emphasizes repression and the possibility of casting it off and that sees repression as a legacy, personal or political, from past acts and arrangements. On this view, transgression, self-discovery, and creative politics may be parallel, even identical, actions: each involves breaking inherited boundaries in order to make the new, often by asserting that the new is the underlying repressed original. The same basic model works even when the idea of an underlying repressed true self or true social order is replaced by a contingent flux of possibilities: that very disorder becomes what is repressed and awaiting

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liberating discovery. Either way, an enhanced agency may emerge from the process of self-discovery or self-demystification.

“Oedipal desire” has close connections with what Foucault calls “the repressive hypothesis” in *The History of Sexuality*. Foucault’s general emphasis on power/knowledge systems and his treatment of subjectivity as an epiphenomenon of such networks militates against seeing the desire or repressed history of any particular subject as central; at the same time, his satiric account of how modern intellectuals mobilize the repressive hypothesis is aimed precisely at the kind of conflation of transgression, self-liberation, and politics I mentioned above as something the oedipal scheme facilitates. Describing the intellectual habits of intellectuals of the 1970s, but in a way that still has traction with respect to our own discursive habits, Foucault comments, “There may be another reason that makes it so gratifying for us to define the relationship between sex and power in terms of repression: something that one might call the speaker’s benefit.” We can, he suggests, gain the glamour of transgression simply by talking about matters we regard as officially “condemned to prohibition, non-existence, and silence,” and by talking in this way we can “somehow anticipate the coming freedom.”

In such talk, Foucault elaborates,

we ardently conjure away the present and appeal to the future, whose day will be hastened by the contribution we believe we are making. Something that smacks of revolt, of promised freedom, of the coming age of a different law, slips easily into this discourse. . . . What sustains our eagerness . . . is doubtless this opportunity to speak out against the powers that be, to utter truths and promise bliss, to link together enlightenment, liberation, and manifold pleasures; to pronounce a discourse that combines the fervor of knowledge, the determination to change the laws, and the longing for the garden of earthly delights.

The strength of the oedipal view is that it facilitates just the sort of intellectual ardor that Foucault describes here, an ardor that takes sides with a better future against a constraining past (whether the formula is “where id was, there ego shall be” or “where phallocentrism was, there free play shall be” or “where domination was, there justice and freedom shall be”). That ardor may be self-serving, and—like anything—it is ludicrous in excess, but it is contagious and inspiring, and progressive literary criticism could not do without it. Indeed, Foucault uses “we” advisedly here since this rhetorical ardor

7. Ibid., 6–7.
is not absent in his own work and is very evident in work influenced by his.

The oedipal myth has played an important part in the interpretation of Marlowe. Certainly it has been important in my own appreciation and teaching of Marlowe, and I think, and will try briefly to show, that Marlowe rewards such an approach to desire. But there is a rival myth of desire, that of Girard, and I want briefly to explore it before turning to Marlowe and Middleton.

Girard sees desire as excited by present circumstances and by rivals in an immediate social surround, rather than as stemming from a buried history or the need to transgress inherited boundaries. In a chapter in his book on censorship that contextualizes Erasmus, J. M. Coetzee offers a pithy summary of Girard’s position. (I am indebted to Coetzee for the oedipal/mimetic distinction I am laying out here.)

Coetzee begins by describing Girard’s triangular model of desire: “Desire does not involve only a desiring subject and a desired object: the object acquires its desirable value through the mediating glance of an Other whose desire serves as a model for the subject’s imitation.” Given this, Girardian desire is not a result of anything deep in the self; rather, it derives from the absence of deep selfhood, or belief in one’s own being: “Desire, then, does not know itself. It proceeds from a lack. What the desiring subject lacks, and ultimately desires, is fullness of being. The model is adopted as model because it appears endowed with superior being.” But, Coetzee continues, given that the desirer desires precisely because she or he perceives a third party’s desire, conflict is built into this desire from its inception: “Because the desires of subject and model by definition coincide, rivalry over the object is from the start built into imitative desire.” And, as Coetzee adds, the rivalry built into this model is by its nature self-intensifying: “Model becomes rival, rival becomes obstacle. In fact, a spiraling dynamic is set in train: the more model transforms itself into obstacle, the more desire tends to transform obstacle into model.”

This can lead to violent conflict: what contains or checks this conflict is hierarchical social difference, which impedes the constitution of all others as potential models/rivals. The greatest possible social crisis, then, is a crisis of no difference.

One can see what a systematic contrast to the oedipal model of desire and agency this scheme of Girard’s presents. Instead of a complex past, partly personal and partly historical or ideological, that

both fosters and thwarts oedipal desire and tries to conceal itself within oedipal desire, mimetic desire arises from the present, shaped by a social dynamic that brings it into being out of nothing. What is scandalous about it is not its secret past cause but its arbitrary present cause. Girard himself comments in the introduction to his book on Shakespeare, *A Theatre of Envy*, that “Shakespeare has his own vocabulary for [mimetic desire] . . . the essential word is ‘envy.’” He goes on to compare envy or mimetic desire with oedipal desire: “Psychic phenomena, we are told, are important in proportion to the resistance they generate toward revelation. If we apply this yardstick to envy as well as to what psychoanalysis designates as repressed, which of the two will make the more plausible candidate for the role of best-defended secret?”

Mimetic desire is scandalous not only in a society in which oedipal desire is widely acknowledged (like our own) but also in any society in which desire is thought to involve a pure relation between subject and object. For Renaissance writers, obviously, either scheme of motivation would have scandalous aspects: both (in some implicit version or representation) could be the revelatory upshot of demystifying theater.

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At this point my argument could proceed strongly or weakly. The strong argument would run as follows: Marlowe, the transgressive atheistical sodomitical alien-besotted overreacher, consistently unmasks forms of oedipal desire in order to show both the ubiquity and the iniquity of a repressive regime and to hint that the best life, and the truest or deepest relation to the problem of agency, will consist in casting it off. The mythic Marlowe is an oedipal Marlowe, a Marlowe who is a strong precursor to Nietzsche.

Middleton, the market-oriented bourgeois, consistently unmasks forms of mimetic desire at play in a strongly regulated social surround in which mimetic rivalry (erotic, mercantile, and occasionally political) is the chief motive. Here, transgression has no large-scale revolutionary resonance but rather is a move actuated by particular circumstances in a delicately observed social situation. As an author, Middleton does not have Marlowe's mythic qualities (just as Girard's view of desire is less influential than Freud's), but if there were a mythic Middleton, the myth associated with Middleton would be a Girardian myth of mimetically generated desire.

I will in fact proceed weakly (the weak path being the one that actually leads through the texts I want to talk about) and instead say the following: the two systems of desire I have outlined, while in competition with each other for our attention (Girard is consistent with his own myth in being a highly rivalrous author), are not comprehensively opposed. Any subject can alternate between these systems in describing his or her own motives or those of others. Many thoughtful people I know are, in fact, persuaded to some degree by both systems and see them as in a general relationship of synchronic explanation (Girard) to diachronic explanation (Freud). Thus, it would be unlikely for Marlowe or Middleton to conform entirely to one system or the other. Moreover, these systems, if present to consciousness for either playwright, were present as master narratives or as aspects of experience rather than as theories. Marlowe’s oedipal interests are connected with his fascination with the father-deposing Olympian succession and also with the myths of Prometheus and Tantalus; they may also be connected with what Patrick Cheney sees as Marlowe’s attempt to emulate Ovid’s relation to Virgil and thus overthrow Spenser. Middleton’s mimetic interests are harder to trace textually, but there are few better classrooms for mimetic rivalry than close observation of the theater companies and guilds of urban businessmen involved in Middleton’s life as a poet who wrote professionally for both kinds of patrons.

At any rate, in their representations and implicit analyses of agency, Middleton does seem to me particularly preoccupied with the dynamics of mimetic rivalry, and Marlowe, particularly occupied with the dynamics of oedipal throwing off (successful or unsuccessful). Let me now briefly illustrate what I mean by this.

In Middleton’s *A Trick to Catch the Old One*, while conventions of New Comedy dictate a somewhat oedipal overall structure reflected in the title (as Witgood strives to wrest control of his lands and of his beloved back from an older generation—his uncle Lucre and Joyce’s uncle Hoard), most of Middleton’s dramatic energy goes into an often hilarious exposure of mimetic rivalry at work. The Hoard/Lucre relation is entirely governed by it: each old usurer assumes the other’s rivalrous malice as the spur to all action, and each acts so as to thwart the other. Moreover, each assumes a world in which such motives

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trump all others (as they have trumped familial loyalty in Lucre’s repossession of Witgood’s lands). This competitive dynamic shapes their professional activity as usurers: they often seem to regard usury as a competition between one another to acquire and pluck victims, rather than as a contractual arrangement between borrower and lender. Thus, Lucre remarks on Hoard’s original grievance against him:

I got the purchase, true; was’t not any man’s case? Yes. Will a wiseman stand as a bawd, whilst another wipes his nose of the bargain? No, I answer, no in that case.12

Hoard’s indignant reply associates rapacious rivalry with the ethos of Jews and, given its suggestions about back doors, sodomites. It suggests that there are normal “friendly” business practices that Lucre has violated.

Was it the part of a friend? No, rather of a Jew. Mark what I say. When I had beaten the bush to the last bird, or, as I may term it, the price to a pound, then, like a cunning usurer, to come in the evening of the bargain and glean all my hopes in a minute! To enter as it were at the back door of the purchase, for thou ne’er cam’st the right way by it.

(1.3.17–23)

Despite Hoard’s evocation of friendship, throughout A Trick rivalrous competition and habitual mutual betrayal enter into all transactions in the city. Witgood’s successful scheme depends upon them. He introduces the Widow—his past mistress the Courtesan in disguise, with papers and rumors attesting to her possession of four hundred pounds a year in land—as a new possible wife for himself and thus causes his creditors to compete with one another in offering him gifts in earnest of new lines of credit:

FIRST CREDITOR [Aside to Witgood] Pray, let my money be accepted before a stranger’s. Here’s forty pound I received as I came to you . . . Let none of them see it, I beseech you. . . . I hope I shall be first in your remembrance After the marriage rites . . .
[To Second and Third Creditors] What, do you walk, sirs?
SECOND CREDITOR I go. [Aside to Witgood] Take no care, sir, for money to furnish you. Within this hour I’ll send you sufficient. [To Third Creditor] Come, Master Cockpit, we both stay for you.

THIRD CREDITOR I ha’ lost a ring, i’faith, I’ll follow you presently.

[Exeunt First and Second Creditors] But you shall find it, sir. I know your youth and expenses have disfurnished you of all jewels. There’s a ruby of twenty pound price, sir: bestow it upon your widow.—What, man, ’twill call up her blood to you. Beside, if I might so much work with you, I would not have you beholding to these blood-suckers for any money.

(3.1.35–59)

From the first, Witgood’s scheme has depended upon imitative desire. He correctly expects his uncle Lucre to catch his own alleged desire for the Widow and her four hundred pounds a year. Witgood aims to get his uncle to return his mortgage or at least lend him money in order eventually to acquire the Widow’s property: “he cannot otherwise choose (though it be but in hope to cozen me again)” (1.1.86–87). But due to the omnipresence of Girardian rivalry, his plan works even better than he expects. Arriving in London, the Widow herself enters into yet another field of mimetic desire. Mrs. Lucre, catching the desire to pursue the Widow by proxy from Lucre’s endorsement of his nephew’s suit, sends her simple son Sam (by a previous marriage) into the fray with golden gifts for the Widow. Hoard learns that Moneylove wishes no longer to pursue Joyce Hoard but rather to turn his pursuit to “the happy rumour of a rich country widow . . . Four hundred a year landed” (2.2.13–16). Moneylove gives Hoard two hundred angels to speak ill to her of “young, riotous Witgood, nephew to your mortal adversary” (2.2.26–27). Hoard accepts, but as soon as Moneylove leaves, comments:

Fool! thou hast left thy treasure with a thief,
To trust a widower with a suit in love!
Happy revenge, I hug thee. I have not only the means laid before me extremely to cross my adversary and confound the last hopes of his nephew, but thereby to enrich my state, augment my revenues, and build mine own fortunes greater. Ha, ha!

(2.2.42–48)

So Hoard begins his suit imitating Moneylove’s desire for the unseen Widow (known only to Moneylove as the rumored object of Witgood’s desire) and plumes himself on the suit because it will further his rivalry with Lucre. And Lucre himself sees it very much this way.

VINTNER The widow’s borne away, sir. . . .
LUCRE Who durst attempt it?
WITGOOD Who but old Hoard, my uncle’s adversary? . . .
LUCRE Hoard, my deadly enemy! Gentlemen, stand to me.
I will not bear it. 'Tis in hate of me.
That villain seeks my shame, nay thirsts my blood.
He owes me mortal malice.
I'll spend my wealth on this despiteful plot
Ere he shall cross me and my nephew thus.

(3.3.100–112)

Indeed, when Hoard appears to have thwarted him, Lucre returns Witgood’s mortgage (as he has told the Widow he would) in an attempt to outbid Hoard and fund a marriage between the Widow and Witgood:

WITGOOD Nothing afflicts me so much
But that it is your adversary, uncle,
And merely plotted in despite of you.
LUCRE Ay, that’s it mads me, spites me! I’ll spend my wealth ere he shall carry her so, because I know ’tis only to spite me. Ay, this is it.
Here, nephew. [Offering him a paper] Before these kind gentlemen, I deliver in your mortgage, my promise to the widow.

(4.2.29–36)

So far mimetic desire, for the most part explicitly attested, drives all important action in the play, and by its logic Middleton illuminates the ways in which agents acquire purposes and also the general system by which their agency is diminished or enhanced. One might cite the foregoing as evidence for the strong version of my thesis: mimetic Middleton. It will not entirely do, however. Not only does oedipal desire plausibly underlie the New Comic intergenerational strife that shapes A Trick to Catch the Old One and other Middleton comedies like it (e.g., A Chaste Maid in Cheapside [1613] and The Roaring Girl [1611]—both of which also offer many straightforward examples of mimetic desire), but something more than Girard’s version of mimetic desire is needed to deal with the remarkable ending of A Trick.

In it the Courtesan—an almost pure object for the projected desires of others (mostly males) through the heart of the play but an articulate subject in the opening scene with Witgood and again as the plot nears its completion—manages her own redescription and revaluation from Courtesan to Wife. Indeed, by being truthful in explicit statements

13. Valerie Wayne discards the source text’s “Courtesan” and renames the character “Jane” in an editorial attempt to assert her agency as a female subject: see Taylor and Lavagnino, Thomas Middleton, 375: “The speech heading ‘courtesan’ fixes her in ways that make it difficult for readers to observe these shifts in identity and grounds a misconception of the character’s sexual inconstancy, constructing for the contemporary reader a woman who makes her living by sexual commerce and is generally available to
to Hoard and Lucre (“I promise you, I ha’ nothing, sir” [3.1.204]), she adheres to a standard of honest speech that no other character except the barely visible Joyce Hoard maintains. She recognizes her own dilemma in an aside shortly after her marriage to Hoard, as she helps persuade Hoard to pay off Witgood’s discounted debts in exchange for Witgood’s release of any claim on her—a speech Shakespeare may adapt and adorn for Caliban:

I’m yet like those whose riches lie in dreams.
If I be wak’d, they’re false. Such is my fate,
Who ventures deeper than the desperate state.
Though I have sinned, yet could I become new,
For where I once vow, I am ever true.

(4.3.148–52)

She recognizes here that she (and Witgood) are people venturing more than they have. Yet, she also recognizes that she might have the value she ventures, if only she “could . . . become new.” To do this, though, she must acquire value as a subject in Hoard’s eyes rather than as an object of mimetic rivalry as pseudowidow or, as whore, an object of mere male exchange.

As whore, she would be an available triumph for Lucre (“Hoard” becoming “Whored”), although some shame might stick on Lucre through Witgood: we see this in the odd exchange after the revelation at the wedding feast:

**KIX** Marry a strumpet!
**HOARD** Gentlemen!
**OESIPHORUS** And Witgood’s quean! . . .
**HOARD** [To Jane] Speak!
**JANE** Alas, you know at first, sir,
I told you I had nothing . . .
**LUCRE** Why, nephew, shall I trace thee still a liar?
Wilt make me mad? Is not yon thing the widow?
**WITGOOD** Why, la! You are so hard o’ belief, uncle.
By my troth, she’s a whore.
**LUCRE** Then thou’rt a knave.
**WITGOOD** Negatur argumentum, uncle.
**LUCRE** Probo tibi, nephew. He that knows a woman to be a quean must needs be a knave.

(5.2.97–114)

While I agree with Wayne that reading Middleton well involves seeing these shifts of identity and value, I have not followed Wayne consistently in the name change because I think the ambiguity of the term “Courtesan” and the character’s status as an ambiguous object of male rivalry and projection who becomes an articulate subject help us see these shifts. I do use “Jane” when quoting Wayne’s text and stage directions below.
This demonstrates that there is not much positive profit for anyone in the new Mrs. Hoard's whoredom (although Witgood invokes the double standard to defend himself against knavery, and Lucre does manage a triumphant “ha, ha, ha!” at Hoard’s expense [5.2.123]). In response, the Courtesan’s defense begins.

Witgood notes that she has not been “a common strumpet,” adding, “I durst depose for her / She ne’er had common use, nor common thought” (5.2.127–28)—probably an assertion that she was his mistress alone, although also hinting that she is mentally and erotically out of the ordinary. And she speaks for herself:

Despise me, publish me: I am your wife.
What shame can I have now but you’ll have part?
If in disgrace you share, I sought not you.
You pursued me, nay, forced me.
Had I friends would follow it,
Less than your action has been proved a rape. . . .
Nor did I ever boast of lands unto you,
Money or goods. I took a plainer course,
And told you true I’d nothing.
If error were committed, ’twas by you.
Thank your own folly. Nor has my sin been
So odious but worse has been forgiven.
Nor am I so deformed but I may challenge
The utmost power of any old man’s love.
She that tastes not sin before twenty,
Twenty to one but she’ll taste it after.
Most of you old men are content to marry
Young virgins and take that which follows,
Where marrying one of us, you both save
A sinner and are quit from a cuckold forever.
“And more, in brief, let this your best thoughts win:
She that knows sin, knows best how to hate sin.”

(5.2.129–51)

The Courtesan here for the first time in the play brings marriage out of a field of mimetic rivalry and asks that it be considered as a contract between two persons, whose happiness or unhappiness will not entirely depend on how it plays to a group of rivalrous males. She suggests a more corporate view of success, and in so doing she transforms the play’s treatment of agency. Since virtually the entire collection of rivals or potential rivals has assembled at the marriage feast, her assertions here are an attempt to persuade not only her husband but also those who might use her to increase their being at his expense, that she should be thought of otherwise.

Neither Girardian rivalry nor oedipal desire is sufficient to account for this sequence; rather, we need to invoke the female subject’s
self-assertion in a field of homosocial rivals that Eve Sedgwick has well described in her influential revision of Girard. 14 (Here we come up against the gender considerations I mentioned when introducing the mimetic/oedipal distinction at the beginning of this essay.) Hoard’s reply shows that his wife has reached him but that he still has thoughts for one rival. I take “malice” and “spite” here (as above) to be terms for mimetic envy:

HOARD  Cursed be all malice! Black are the fruits of spite,
And poison first their owners. O my friends,
I must embrace shame, to be rid of shame.
Concealed disgrace prevents a public name.
Ah Witgood! Ah Theodorus!

WITGOOD  Alas, sir, I was pricked in conscience to see her well
bestowed, and where could I bestow her better than upon your
pitiful worship? Excepting but myself, I dare swear she’s a virgin.
And now by marrying your niece, I have banished myself forever
from her.

(5.2.152–61)

So a play devoted to exposing mimetic rivalry ends with a local, partial, and doubtless temporary escape from its dominance. Thus, the play offers its audience a demystified view of marriage in terms of markets and mimetic rivalry, but it also suggests that enhanced agency in marriage through a newly corporate view of social behavior may emerge from the demystification.

It remains plausible to say on the basis of this analysis that, at least in his comedies, Middleton is more concerned with mimetic than with oedipal desire. And it is possible to speculate that Middleton associates mimetic rivalry with male perspectives and comes up with alternative social descriptions when imagining female speaking subjects. Since Middleton’s London comedies are mercantile, it may also be that he associates mimetic rivalry, appropriately enough, with market economics.

A glance at Women Beware Women suggests that in a play that focuses to an unusual degree on female subjectivity, Middleton at times figures desire oedipally rather than mimetically. Bianca, installed as the Duke’s mistress, remarks:

How strangely woman’s fortune comes about!
This was the farthest way to come to me,
All would have judged, that knew me born in Venice,

And there with many jealous eyes brought up,
That never thought they had me sure enough
But when they were upon me. Yet my hap
To meet it here, so far off from my birthplace,
My friends, or kindred. 'Tis not good, in sadness,
To keep a maid so strict in her young days;
Restraint breeds wand’ring thoughts, as many fasting days
A great desire to see flesh stirring again.
I'll ne'er use any girl of mine so strictly.15

She invokes the repressive hypothesis and prescribes Dr. Spock.

Yet, Women Beware Women, like The Changeling and The Revenger’s Tragedy, is particularly sensitive to the immediate power of local moral environments over character and thus could be counted as generally mimetic. The same close collaboration of mimetic and oedipal motive can be seen in the bastard Spurio’s decision to sleep with his step-mother to revenge himself for his illegitimacy in Revenger’s:

Duke, thou didst do me wrong, and by thy act
Adultery is my nature.
Faith, if the truth were known, I was begot
After some gluttonous dinner; some stirring dish
Was my first father. When deep healths went round,
And ladies’ cheeks were painted red with wine,
Their tongues as short and nimble as their heels,
Uttering words sweet and thick, and, when they rose,
Were merrily disposed to fall again—
In such a whisp’ring and withdrawing hour,
When base male bawds kept sentinel at stair-head,
Was I stol’n softly.

(Revenger’s 1.2.178–89)

Here we have a classic oedipal motive from deep personal history (for replacing the father in his bed), but at the same time Spurio claims that not his father individually but rather the immediate moral environment of his conception truly begot him. It is worth emphasizing, given my general argument, that Spurio demystifies toward an environmental explanation and away from an oedipal one. De Flores’s famous admonition to Beatrice-Johanna has something of the same localizing force:

15. Thomas Middleton, Women Beware Women, 4.1.23–34, in English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology, ed. David Bevington, Lars Engle, Katharine Eisaman Maus, and Eric Rasmussen (New York: Norton, 2002). Subsequent references to this and other Middleton plays are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the text.
Fly not to your birth, but settle you
In what the act has made you; you’re no more now.
You must forget your parentage to me.
You’re the deed’s creature.

(Changeling 3.4.134–37)

In a noncategorical or weak form, then, the notion of a mimetic Middleton has some critical utility. What about the idea of an oedipal Marlowe?

Let me be brief and schematic. Marlowe’s boldness stems from the open challenges to habitually accepted forms of authority that fill his works: dismissals of the sanctity or power of religious and political and heterosexual orders. Yet, since these orders prove resilient in his plays and characteristically reassert their strength, Marlowe’s demystifications do not always seem to stick—or, perhaps, Marlowe is so skeptical about the stability or safety of any strategy of agency that he is driven to deconstruct even his own demystifications. The deep authorities they challenge tend in the end to defeat the unlikely challengers: Scythian shepherds, Jewish merchants, scholarly magicians, and kings under the influence of their minions. Critics have often been tempted to treat these defeats as remystifications (or reassertions of the moral truth). And here I think the oedipal/mimetic distinction can be helpful.

The grand resonant gestures in Marlowe’s plays are oedipal self-assertions, with all the mixed political and personal liberatory significance that oedipal systems permit. It would be easy to make a catalog of such gestures, and they would be instantly recognizable. Tamburlaine justifies his betrayal of Cosroë by asserting that the human psyche endlessly wills self-assertion:

Nature, that framed us of four elements,
Warring within our breasts for regiment,
Doth teach us all to have aspiring minds.
Our souls . . .
Still climbing after knowledge infinite. . .
Wills us to wear ourselves and never rest
Until we reach the ripest fruit of all:
That perfect bliss and sole felicity,
The sweet fruition of an earthly crown.\(^\text{16}\)

As a prediction of crowned repose for Tamburlaine, this is of course faulty, but as an exhibition of how enhanced awareness of our deep

\(^{16}\) Christopher Marlowe, Tamburlaine the Great, pt. 1, 2.7.18–29, in Bevington et al., English Renaissance Drama. Subsequent references to this and other Marlowe plays are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the text.
desires trumps conventional inhibitions on aggressivity, it is a classic of liberatory demystification. Faustus declares his ravishment with an extravagant intensity, throwing off the moral tradition as if it were utterly weightless:

Had I as many souls as there be stars,  
I’d give them all for Mephistopheles.

*(Doctor Faustus 1.3.104–5)*

Barabas makes a somewhat similar statement of commitment, challenging rival forms of power, moral or political, to assert his own chosen path:

seld-seen costly stones of so great price  
As one of them, indifferently rated  
And of a carat of this quantity,  
May serve, in peril of calamity,  
To ransom great kings from captivity.  
This is the ware wherein consists my wealth;  
And thus methinks should men of judgment frame  
Their means of traffic from the vulgar trade,  
And as their wealth increaseth, so enclose  
Infinite riches in a little room.

*(The Jew of Malta 1.1.28–37)*

For Edward II, the assertion is erotic, casting off his father’s will and his barons’ expectations to fulfill imperative desire:

Thy worth, sweet friend, is far above my gifts;  
Therefore, to equal it, receive my heart.  
If for these dignities thou be envied,  
I’ll give thee more, for but to honor thee  
Is Edward pleased with kingly regiment.

*(Edward II 1.1.160–64)*

Each of these characters casts off or defies conventional moral values in order to pursue an idiosyncratic course of self-fulfillment. In portraying such gestures as both imperative and attractive, Marlowe suggests that the Christian commitments of his audience are mystifications and that it is liberating to move beneath them toward an oedipal system of desire. Although some of these gestures defying an entrenched system are regretted or qualified in the course of dramatic action, Marlowe’s drama makes us well aware that the strength of an entrenched system is not the same as its truth, and he also continually exhilarates us with the possibility of defiance.
It helps in thinking about this issue to note that Marlowe also demystifies toward a mimetic system of desire. As the quotation from *Edward II* above suggests, the background view of ordinary social and political interaction in Marlowe highlights environmental envy and competition and is thus mimetic. Edward’s passions for Gaveston and Spencer, although they doubtless yield moments of transcendence, hardly remove him from a field of mimetic rivalry; rather, they disable him in such a field. Indeed the barons’ reaction to Gaveston stems partly from their indignation at the nonmimetic basis of Edward’s attachment:

Mortimer Jr: Why should you love him whom the world hates so?
Edward: Because he loves me more than all the world.

(*Edward II* 1.4.76–77)

*The Jew of Malta* offers another clear case of oedipal self-assertion against a mimetic background. Machiavel’s prologue, an exercise in overt demystification, explains politics as power and envy behind a contemptible mask of sanctity:

I count religion but a childish toy,
And hold there is no sin but ignorance. . . .
What right had Caesar to the empire?
Might first made kings, and laws were then most sure
When, like the Draco’s, they were writ in blood . . .
O’th’poor petty wits
Let me be envied and not pitièd!

(*The Jew of Malta*, prologue, 14–27)

Desire for power in this field will be at least somewhat mimetic (although the Machiavel seems to see the will to power as a fundamental rather than an imitative drive), and the play shows sexual desire also in mimetic terms, as we see when Mathias reports to Lodowick on Abigail:

Mathias: The sweetest flower in Cytherea’s field . . .
And strangely metamorphosed nun. . . .

Lodowick: Is she so fair?
Mathias: And matchless beautiful;
As, had you seen her, ’twould have moved your heart,
Though countermured with walls of brass, to love,
Or at the least to pity.

Lodowick: And if she be so fair as you report,
’Twere time well spent to go and visit her.
How say you, shall we?
MATHIAS    I must and will, sir; there’s no remedy.
LODOWICK    And so will I too, or it shall go hard.

(The Jew of Malta 1.2.376–90)

Here, as relatively rarely in Marlowe (and commonly in Middleton), we see a subject catching desire for an object from a model in complete accord with the mimetic system.

In summary, then, when Marlowe sweeps off masks of convention to reveal new possibilities for personal gratification, he demystifies in the direction of an oedipal system of desire, but he also at times and in the background, in ways that are never taken back, demystifies in a mimetic direction. Middleton is more consistently mimetic in his style of demystification. Both offer searching accounts of the problem of agency that are also, and simultaneously, self-help guides for their audiences.

This essay has proposed, with qualifications, a mimetic Middleton, who sets the aspirations and strategies of agents in a strong economic field of triangulated desire, set against a mythic oedipal Marlowe, whose agents remake themselves by casting off convention and attempting to force the world to shape itself according to their idiosyncrasies. It has demonstrated that for each of these playwrights, an apparently demystifying strategy is one that is also, in effect, proposing a system to live by, a mode of agency, for receptive auditors. It has suggested that this sort of paradox, where apparent stripping away of life systems is in fact the proposal of an alternative, less familiar, and thereby more exciting system, is characteristic of literary demystifications of human agency. In effect, the essay suggests, if you thrust agency out the door it comes back in through the window.

These suggestions probably suffice for one essay, already long on provocative generalizations. But what about Shakespeare? He clearly learned to create characters with enormous world-altering antimoral aspirations from Marlowe, and we could put this in Coetzee’s terms, by saying that he learned from Marlowe the dramatic power of oedipal representations. But he also sets his characters, even Marlovian oedipal loners like Richard III, in a more tightly and richly understood context of ongoing relationships than Marlowe does. If we were to think of Shakespeare’s work as a corrective commentary on Marlowe’s, Shakespeare’s main critique of Marlowe might be that Marlowe’s intensities are reductive and that Marlowe attenuates the ties of local habitation, putting giant individuals in a thin and shadowy world. Another way of saying this would be to comment that Shakespeare is clearly a less consistent demystifier than Marlowe. It is hard to cast Shakespeare’s
works as a devastating critique of Renaissance conventionalities, whereas Marlowe’s cry out to be so understood—indeed, a number of commentators believe this aspect of Marlowe’s work to have been fatal to the playwright.  

Does this mean that Shakespeare is more like Middleton? Middleton is junior to Shakespeare and is clearly more likely to be receiving influence than exerting it (witness the relation of The Revenger’s Tragedy to Hamlet or of The Changeling to Othello), yet Middleton deviates from Shakespeare in foregrounding the ways a rivalrous environment generates desire in particular agents. This gives Middleton’s drama an anticonventional edge. As we have noted above, for edge seeking as a poetic strategy, Middleton may well have looked back through the giant example of Shakespeare to Marlowe.

Certainly it is possible to present Shakespeare’s treatment of the generation of idiosyncratic desire as a combination of oedipal and mimetic, and this would be quite an illuminating way to discuss a number of plays. But no plausible essence of the Shakespearean can be distilled by isolating a particular demystifying strategy, and this makes Shakespeare’s relation to issues of demystification more elusive than Marlowe’s or Middleton’s. For people seeking transformative representations of particular strategies of agency, this may also mean that Shakespeare is less immediately useful than Marlowe or Middleton.
