

The least certain of boundaries: gendered bodies and gendered spaces in Early Modern drama

Jacqueline PEARSON
University of Manchester

ABSTRACT

Ben Jonson's *Epicoene* uses repeated symbolic reference to doors, windows, walls and thresholds as part of its discourse of gender and the transgression of gender boundaries, thereby interrogating received ideas of gender and thematising its circumstances of performance by the boy actors. This article suggests that this definition of gender through spatial boundaries is the most consistent and inventive of the period, but not different in kind from other domestic plays. It enters into the debate about the gendering of public and private spheres in the early modern period, and also sees strategies with gendered space as part of a strategy of reconciling two apparently incompatible Jacobean formulations of gender difference, which was considered as both substantial and innate, and also unstable and performative.

There is a weird contradiction at the heart of early modern conceptualisations of gender difference. On the one hand, men and women were seen as very different in nature, temperament, role, status, and place on the Great Chain of Being, and these allegedly innate and natural differences were canonised in law, theology, and writings on conduct and society. Anthony Fletcher (1995:vxi-xvii,14), for instance, writes about gender as 'rooted in an understanding of the body,' with 'woman ... seen as a creature distinct from and inferior to man.' As Sir Thomas Elyot put it in 1531, 'A man in his natural perfection is fierce, hardy, strong in opinion, covetous of glory, desirous of knowledge, appetiting by generation to bring forth his semblable. The good nature of a woman is to be mild, timorous, tractable, benign, of sure remembrance, and shamefast' (p.93).

On the one hand, then, men and women were innately very different with different qualities of mind and soul, reflected in different social roles and the different physical spaces that reflect those social differences. On the other hand, though, as Thomas Laqueur's writing on the history of sex has famously demonstrated, the Galenic 'one-sex model' of human physiology represented sex not as a binary opposition but as a sliding scale. As Helkiah

Crooke wrote, men and women possessed the same sexual organs; but the 'hotter nature' of men causes those organs to appear on the outside of the body, while women's 'dull and sluggish heat' kept the sexual organs inside the body. There is clearly a homology between the distribution of bodily parts – outside in men, inside in women – with the spatial imperatives associated with the sexes - men outside, women inside. But this model of the body was also seen as disturbingly fluid and unfixed. Helkiah Crooke knew 'Stories of such Women, whose more active and more operative heat have thrust out their Testicles, and of Women made them Men' (1616:204).

This weird physiology of gender fluidity and transformation resonates in some early modern plays, like Lyly's *Gallathea* and Jonson's *Epicoene*. It lies, perhaps, behind other anxieties about gender boundaries. As Stephen Orgel (1996:153) has memorably written, 'In the discourses of patriarchy, gender is the least certain of boundaries.'

'Gender is the least certain of boundaries.' What I mean to do in this paper is to discuss how gender boundaries are reflected and negotiated through the use of physical, spatial, architectural boundaries in Early Modern plays – houses, doors and windows, grates, walls and so on. There is actually strangely little research on space in the drama, except in attempts to reconstruct staging, though this is beginning to change. As Alice T. Friedman (1989:7) has put it, 'spaces and boundaries exert their own influences on the patterns of behavior enacted within them,' and this clearly has relevance to issues of gender.

Some critics argue that an understanding of space in the early modern period as structured in terms of public and private spheres, which are associated with men and women respectively, is anachronistic: indeed, perhaps this is 'the prevailing orthodoxy' (Huebert 2001:63). Susan Dwyer Amussen (1988:2) argues that our familiar 'dichotomy ... between public and private is necessarily false when applied to the experience of early modern England.' Nancy Armstrong (1987:3) traces to the eighteenth century the invention of 'a new kind of woman,' the 'domestic woman,' and feminist historians have chronicled the rise of an ideology of separate spheres, public/male and private/female, in the same period.

However, more recently some historians have questioned whether the early modern period actually preceded an idea of separate spheres. Retha Warnicke (1993:123) attacks the belief that 'early-modern people ignored the distinctions between private and public' and reiterates in a more nuanced way the idea that 'women's lives were ... much more private' and associated with enclosed, inner spaces (129), and Ronald Huebert (2001:63) accuses of a 'misappropriation' of Habermas those who argue that public and private spheres as such did not exist in the early modern period. His argument is, perhaps, the most judicious on the topic to date: 'although the line between

public and private was not drawn at precisely the same place by early modern writers as it would be today, it was nonetheless drawn with great regularity and with complete confidence in the meaningfulness of the distinction.' It is, it seems to me, certain that the conservative voices of Shakespeare's early plays represent a world defined by the confinement of women to the home while men occupy a public sphere *avant la lettre*. The husband 'commits his body / To painful labour both by sea and land' in order to allow the wife to lie 'warm at home, secure and safe'; his role lies 'out o' door,' hers within (*The Taming of the Shrew* V.ii.149-50, 152; and *The Comedy of Errors* II.i.11). Doors, in fact, will play a central role in my argument. Lena Cowen Orlin (1994:8) argues that the inspiration of domestic tragedy is the voyeuristic desire 'to see through walls,' but I am less concerned with seeing through walls than with the establishment, transgression, and negotiation, of walls both literal and metaphorical. I will associate images of doors, windows, thresholds and other liminal spaces, with gender transgression and indeterminacy. Finally I will offer a full-scale reading of Ben Jonson's *Epicoene*, a play where doors and windows, closed and open rooms, private and public spaces, are repetitively alluded to and meticulously defined.

Many early modern plays, to begin by stating the obvious, focus on figures of ambiguous gender. To quote Orgel (1996:112) again, 'Even as the age defined its gender boundaries, it also continually – one might almost say compulsively – produced figures who overstepped or violated them.' Transvestite heroines through the drama. The Shakespearian trope of the pageboy revealed as 'really' a girl in love with his master became a predictable convention in the drama – so much so, indeed, that in Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Honest Man's Fortune* (1613), although this dramatic conclusion is confidently predicted by a number of characters, the joke is that the apparent pageboy is really a pageboy.

But those who transgress gender categories may be more radically ambiguous. The real-life transvestite Moll Frith, who is staged in Middleton and Dekker's *The Roaring Girl* (c.1610), is 'woman more than man, / Man more than woman' (I.ii.130-1). As a result of this gender hybridity, she is defined not only through ambiguous clothing but also through an association with both closed and open spaces, 'chamber[s]' (IV.i.86, 93) but also extra-domestic spaces like 'Grays Inn Fields' and the like (II.i.294). Jonson's *Epicoene* ends with the revelation that Morose's bride is really 'a gentleman's son' (V. iv.183) and that the marriage is therefore, to Morose's immense relief, invalid. Margaret Cavendish's *The Convent of Pleasure* reveals that the princess 'of a Masculine Presence' (II.3. Shaver ed. 1999:226) is really a prince.

Lyly's *Gallathea* (1592) imagines a world where the fairest virgin must become a human sacrifice to a sea-monster. As a result the two heroines, Gallathea and Phillida, are disguised as boys by their fathers. In these disguises they fall in love, although both fear and suspect the sex of the other. At the end of the play, the goddess Venus agrees to further their love by transforming one of them – we never learn which and the transformation does not actually take place within the bounds of the play – into a boy. Theodora A. Jankowski (1996:253) reads *Gallathea* as a play flattering Queen Elizabeth with its praise of virginity, but also presenting the concept of virginity as 'decidedly problematical.' Not only virginity, though, but gender itself becomes problematic. Indeed, one could argue that the play represents desire in the form of a Freudian pre-gendered polymorphous perversity. Two girls, disguised as two boys, love each other, thus flirting with both lesbianism and male homoerotic desire: there are accusations of incestuous desire, that Melebeus shows 'affection ... more than fatherly' (IV.i.40-1) for his daughter Phillida; and 'leering Cupid' (IV.ii.2) embodies desire in all its forms.

In this world of polymorphous desire, the goddess Venus and the Alchemist both embody a world of transformation without fixed boundaries between spaces, elements or identities. In the final scene one girl is transformed but we never learn which. What matters, it seems, is desire itself and its multiple potential. The forms which structure desire seem almost irrelevant. In this world of fluidity, transformation, and desire without boundaries, it is entirely appropriate that most of the action takes place out of doors: the architectural spaces and boundaries by which humans structure their lives are wholly unimportant. In addition, the outside world is itself one marked by geological and historical change and the transgression and indeed complete redrawing of boundaries. The 'stately temple of white marble' in which Neptune was worshipped is now only a 'heap of small pebble' (I.i.15-16). It is also a coastline subject to constant geological change: 'ships sail where sheep fed' (I.i.33), the boundaries between land and sea are uncertain, and the sea itself, as represented by Neptune and the monster the Ager is itself an element representing fluidity and change. Even the euphuistic prose seems to dramatise not only the establishment but also the abolition of difference.

While *Gallathea* structures its remarkably relaxed celebration of the multiplicity of desire on the absence of man-made structures and boundaries, more commonly dramatists emphasise the symbolic and metaphorical significance of houses, walls, doors and windows for a discourse of gender. The house and the human body, to state the obvious, are often closely identified in the writing of this period, as in the second book of Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* the house of Alma allegorises the body and its faculties.

Women were not only thought appropriate to the domestic sphere: the female body often stood in a metaphorical relation with the house. In Jonson's 'To Penshurst,' the poem charts an imaginary journey from the outskirts of the Sidney estate to the very centre of the country house which serves as a metonym for the English nation; from its public to its most private spaces. At the very heart, sustaining its utopian qualities, is the inner room of the lord and lady, and the chaste yet fertile body of Barbara Gamage Sidney, 'A wonder in this age but rarely known,' as Jonson misogynistically comments (Pearson 2001). This line suggests that the female body is the essential foundation for the family, the dynasty and the nation state, but also that at the same time the female body poses serious threats to that familial and national stability. As Gail Kern Paster (1993) has memorably demonstrated, the boundaries of the female body were viewed as especially problematic. The leaky female body – associated with disorderly extrusions of urine, menstrual blood and other fluids – challenged the idea of the clean proper body, with defined boundaries and an orderly place in the universe. This conflict between ways of reading the female body is often in the drama negotiated through images of closed and open spaces, private and public spaces.

As Alison Findlay (1999:128) has written, 'plays that centred on the family and home were always essentially political in nature,' for in a familiar early modern trope the family was directly parallel to the state: fathers, as Hooker puts it, have 'in private families' the same power that 'lawful kings' hold in the public sphere (Keble ed. 1888:I,242). It is to state no more than the obvious, perhaps, to argue that domestic tragedy situates itself obsessively within the physical and architectural detail of the home, and that this detail is used repeatedly as a metaphor for the female body. In *A Yorkshire Tragedy* (1608), as Viviana Comensoli (1999:99) points out, the words 'home' and 'house' appear more than 15 times, as the Husband 'of a virtuous house' (ii.170) murders his wife and thus brings about 'the desolation of his house' (ix.33). The bleeding bodies of his murdered children, 'Laid forth upon our *threshold*' (x.34: my italics) delineate the limits of patriarchal domesticity. Similarly in *A Warning for Fair Women* (1599), Anne Sanders rebuffs her seducer at the door of her house (Orlin 1994:108), and before she becomes the murderess of her husband, she and her son 'sit at her doore' and she talks of ensuring that her 'Closet [is] lockt' (ii.323-7). At this point of the play Anne Sanders is in a morally and physically liminal situation – she may go through the door to seduction or back into the house, where the locked closet with its contents of fruit serves as a metaphor for the clean proper body which she is about to transgress. At the end of the play, as she is about to be executed for the murder of her husband, Anne bequeaths her children a 'booke / Of holy meditations' which

will keep them 'Safer than in faire buildings' (xxi.2706). Comensoli's overall argument is that domestic tragedy 'neither uniformly nor unequivocally upholds the cults of civility and domesticity' (1999:68). I am not sure whether the general proposition is convincing, but it is clear that the 'faire buildings' of the patriarchal home and the female body are terrifyingly vulnerable.

In Heywood's *A Woman Kill'd with Kindness* (1603), Mountford's house and land possess 'a virgin title, never yet deflower'd' (Wilson Verity ed. 1888:29), and thus provide a perfect parallel to Susan Mountford's virgin body. Both offer capital – both cultural and literal – to her impoverished brother. The clean proper female body is dramatised through the safe boundaries of the house and estate. As Mountford offers his sister to Acton in payment of his debt, attention is again drawn to the limits of the domestic space – 'This is the gate...' (61) – though Susan will only go through the gate into marriage, her virgin body reconciling her brother and his enemy.

Like Mountford, Frankford is also 'preoccupied with the integrity of his house' (Orlin 1994:154), and as in the case of Mountford, this integrity is reflected by the bodies of female family members. However, while Susan Mountford's chastity saves their house, Anne Frankford's adultery draws attention to the dangerous permeability of the boundaries of the physical house, of the household, and of the female body. Anne Frankford's seducer is Wendoll, whom her husband has welcomed into his household as his 'companion' (Wilson Verity ed. 1888:18). As he becomes Anne's lover, he penetrates not only her body but also the inner parts of the house, her 'private chamber' (49). In the fourth act, when Wendoll and Anne go to bed and Frankford discovers them together, much is made of the locking of doors and gates and the keeping of keys. Frankford enters his house drawing a detailed geography of it, as he goes through 'My outward gate; / This is the hall-door; this the withdrawing chamber, / But this ... door ... / It leads to my polluted bed-chamber ...' (52). Lena Cowen Orlin (1994:146,149) draws attention to the 'proliferation of domestic detail' that asserts Frankford's gentry status, but also the 'disjunction between Frankford and his house' that takes place at this traumatic moment. He claims his house again when he retires to his study to consider her fate, and then exiles her to another mansion. Anne's punishment for having 'polluted' and 'stained' (Wilson Verity ed. 1888:52, 62) the domestic space is her banishment from it. There is a striking scene in the fifth act where Acton, Mountford, Susan and others stand 'Before the Manor' (69) to which Anne is banished, again drawing our attention to the limits of domestic space and so by implication Anne's transgression of those limits. Finally the only way of regaining her clean proper body and her marriage is the destruction of that body: as she dies of starvation and remorse Frankford joins her within the newly defined

domestic space, recreating it as a home and her as a wife, a re-creation only possible at the moment of its dissolution.¹

In *Arden of Faversham* (1592) Anne Arden's transgression of wifely obedience through adultery and husband murder is also dramatised through obsessive attention to the details of the physical space of the domestic home, its walls, doors and chambers and even its furniture. Arden's house, in fact, still survives today in Faversham in Kent, and it may be that even in the 1590s, some 40 years after the murder, the playwright may have been familiar with the real house. Enclosed spaces in this play sometimes figure female chastity: when Shakebag talks about a whore 'opening her shop windows' (XIV.13) the building reflects and euphemises the female body, and Alice's constant leaving of the domestic space suggests her disorderly nature. But likewise she appropriates an ideology of domestic containment for her own purposes, as when, for instance, she locks Mosby in her closet (I.191).

The battle between the Ardens is partly enacted over the language of the domestic. As Viviana Comensoli (1999:84) points out, Arden repeatedly refers to 'my house,' while Alice too tries to claim some ownership of the domestic home, asking her lover Mosby to come to 'my door' (I.128) or insisting on referring to 'our house' (X.25). Alice is 'descended of a noble house' (I.202) – in fact she was the stepdaughter of Sir Thomas North – and she struggles to appropriate to herself the domestic space of the Arden household. Arden, in Holinshed and in the play, is not a murdered innocent. His appropriation of the Abbey lands – where, ultimately, ironically, his body will be found – and his possible defrauding of Reede – identify him with a new breed of rising entrepreneurs different from the old aristocracy where Alice's origins lie and the values of the gentry house (in all senses of that noun). His hoarding and opportunistic profiteering unsettle old class and religious hierarchies and, perhaps, teach Alice to do likewise, uniting with her class-inferior Mosby to murder her husband and 'usurp [his] room' (IV.29) and his house.

An early attempt at murder happens in Franklin's 'house' (III.173) at Aldersgate. The servant Michael, who is in on the plot, promises to leave 'the doors ... unlocked' (III.173) for the murderers, advising them to go 'over the threshold to the inner court' (III.175), where they will find on the left

¹ Rebecca Ann Bach (1998:504-505,515), argues that the play 'is not about the heterosexual couple' at all – indeed the heterosexual couple 'did not exist,' and the 'domestic' space, the 'household' is 'a space where men interact with men, not as the private space of the modern nuclear family.' This argument is interesting and to some degree convincing, especially in the subplot, but it dangerously erases Anne Frankford and can make no sense of her seduction by Wendoll. It also, it seems to me, misreads the play's strategy with space.

stairs leading directly to Arden's chamber. The plot, however, goes wrong: sleeping 'Upon the threshold' (IV.91) Michael has a bad dream and rouses the household, and Arden discovers that 'the doors were all unlocked' (IV.101). When Mosby relates this episode to the assassins, he reinvents the past by describing how Franklin and Arden were talking late 'in the porch' (VII.9) and Franklin found 'the doors unbolted and unlocked' (VII.7). This episode in the play makes constant reference to liminal spaces, doors, thresholds and porches, and their function, at this point still successful, to protect the inner spaces, especially in this exclusively male space where the disruptive power of women is temporarily absent.

Ironically in *Arden of Faversham* the open spaces which in Elizabethan thought would have been seen as dangerously haunted by masterless men and other vagrants are all perfectly safe for Arden. He passes unharmed through Rainham Down, notorious for its robbers (VII.18), the 'park' (VI.6) in which he dreams he is a deer pursued to his death, and the frightening misty landscape of Scene XI where Shakebag falls into a ditch. Indeed, open spaces seem to contrive to save him in ways which can be hilariously comic, like the episode where Black Will's head is broken as an apprentice closes up a bookstall in Paul's churchyard. Ironically, Arden is in most danger in the space which ought to be the safest of all for him, his own house. Ronald Heubert (1997:26) reminds us that in More's *Utopia* the private sphere is dismantled as 'threatening to the welfare of the utopian commonwealth,' and plays like *Arden of Faversham* express both the utopian cult of the patriarchal home and a deep anxiety about the meaning of its interior, feminised space. It is in his own house that Alice tries to poison Arden at the beginning of the play, and where at the end he is finally murdered. Other houses, too, protect him, like Franklin's at Aldersgate and Lord Cheiny's at Shorlow. Towards the end of the play even the proverbial language in common usage represents the home as a dangerous place. 'Home is a wild cat to a wand'ring wit' (X.13), says Alice, apparently trying to persuade her husband to stay at home: and the Ferryman who encounters Franklin and Arden in the mist and is a symbolically Charon-like figure who represents death, has a repertoire of anti-domestic sayings: 'like to a curst wife in a little house ... then looks he as if his house were afire...' (XI.11-13).

Closed and open spaces also become central especially in the language of the murderers. They plan to kill Arden within his own 'home' – a word that echoes through Scene XIV where the murder actually takes place – and leave his body 'behind the Abbey' (XIV.123), as if he had been killed by a 'slave' (XIV.125). The closed and open spaces – the house as opposed to the open ground outside – reflects the state of Alice's body, supposedly a clean proper body closed to all but her husband, but in actuality a leaky, 'strumpet' (XIV.405) body, as the reference to other whores in the scene of the murder

and immediately afterwards reinforces. Alice imagines that when the door next 'open[s]' she will be rid of her husband and 'no more be closed in Arden's arms' (XIV.143). 'Black Will is lock'd within' (XIV.160), as previously in their loveplay Alice had locked Mosby in her closet. Michael is ordered to 'lock the street door' (XIV.167) when Arden arrives, this time not to protect him from external dangers but to prevent his escape and ensure his murder. When Arden arrives, Alice tells him that 'the doors are open,' though Michael reminds us that this is a lie for he has 'locked' them (XIV.197-8). Finally, Arden is murdered, after he and Alice each strives to appropriate the house and identify it as 'my house' (XIV.212, 217).

In the confusion afterwards, the words 'house,' 'doors,' and references to closed and open spaces continue to proliferate to draw our attention to the central irony, that what should have been Arden's safest haven in fact becomes the place of most danger and death, as Alice's body, which should have been reserved for Arden alone, becomes the source of his death. Franklin leads a search for evidence 'through every room' (XIV.372) and his repeated comments underline the irony – 'I fear me he was murdered in this house ... he was murdered in this room' (XIV.393,400). Justice is performed at the end of the play – Black Will is burned 'in Flushing on a stage' (Epilogue, 6) – but the audience's feelings are remarkably ambivalent. Even the epilogue, spoken by Arden's friend Franklin, points out the irony that Arden's body was found 'in that plot of ground / Which he by force and violence held from Reede' (pp.9-10). Arden's appropriation of land – even the appropriation of 'my house' from his wife and helpmeet – may be the foundation of Alice's adultery and murder. As Comensoli (1999:84) writes, this play 'invites the spectator to confront the possibility that ... civility and domestic patriarchy are neither unchangeable nor metaphysically ordained,' and that it demonstrates that 'the structures of authority ... are treated problematically.' This problematisation of structures of authority is partly done through the problematisation of physical, architectural structures, and Alice Arden's transgression of the boundaries of wifely obedience is enacted by the play's constant allusions to boundaries and their transgression in the form of doors, walls, rooms and houses.

Lynda Hart (1989:8-9) has argued that women dramatists are particularly preoccupied with theatrical space, which they use as a metaphor 'to disclose and critique women's confinement while suggesting liberating strategies from the patriarchal order.' Aphra Behn for instance, associates gender transgression with the passing of physical boundaries, as Angellica Bianca's house in *The Rover* (1677) draws attention to its doors and windows, and is the site not only of Angellica's public trading with her body but also of Hellena's assumption of male disguise. Derek Hughes (2001:58-9,50) writes of Behn's command of theatrical space and her 'alternation of

public and private spaces' as part of her discourse of gender difference and her analysis of 'public or social identity.'

In Margaret Cavendish's *The Convent of Pleasure*, the wealthy and beautiful heiress Lady Happy decides after the death of her father to establish a convent as a place of safety away from 'the publick world' (Shaver ed. 1999:218) where women face dangers of commodification and loss of identity as they are absorbed into the heterosexual economy. The convent is associated with 'pleasure' but also more oddly with 'Nature' (p.219), for women cannot know or enjoy their own individual nature within the patriarchal order as it is currently constituted. The convent is a place with very secure boundaries: 'there are no Grates, but Brick and Stone-walls ... the Walls are a Yard-thick' (p.227). The foolish men outside who seek Lady Happy simply as a form of lavish commodity cannot enter. It will not even work for them to assume 'Womens Apparel' (p.227), for they lack the basic skills needed by women of any class. The convent thus dramatises the clean and proper female body, but it is no penance to keep to the bounds of this proper space / body, for the convent has 'so much compass of ground' that there is 'room' for anything its inhabitants might need for pleasure and luxury (p.223). Within their secure boundaries, the women perform playlets enacting the difficulties of women's lives, the pain and danger of childbirth, dangers of rape and forced marriage, betrayal by husbands, the death of children.

However, the thick walls of the convent are more permeable than it might seem. The Princess, 'a Princely brave Woman ... and of a Masculine Presence' (p.226), enters the convent, and gains consent from Lady Happy to join the ladies who 'do accoutre Themselves in Masculine-Habits, and act Lovers-parts,' especially to Lady Happy herself. Lady Happy welcomes this 'innocent ... Lover' (p.229), but gradually comes to fear that her love for the Princess is outside 'Nature' (p.234). However, the Princess is in truth a Prince. The play, it may be, like *Gallathea* allows the possibility of lesbian desire, but unlike *Gallathea* that subversive desire must ultimately be contained. It may be that the Prince's ability to enter the convent demonstrates an androgyny which allows him to make a relationship with Lady Happy which transcends patriarchy. But it is somewhat disturbing that he threatens to gain Lady Happy 'by force of Arms' (p.244) if necessary; and that Lady Happy is almost entirely silent after the revelation of the Prince's true sex. As Lady Happy loses her voice, so to some degree does Margaret Cavendish, and large sections of the last two acts are attributed to the Duke of Newcastle, her husband. The convent walls, then, define and protect the clean proper body, but women must, despite the play's very glum treatment of marriage, leave the convent and enter the heterosexual economy. Finally the convent is divided into two sections, for virgins and

widows. The heterosexual economy can be evaded for set periods, but marriage is the only proper destiny for the mature woman.

In Ben Jonson's *Epicoene* (1610), gender boundaries and their transgression are enacted through physical, architectural boundaries in the most inventive and consistent way yet. I want to write into this section what has been conspicuously missing so far, a consideration of the original circumstances of performance of the play. Like Lyly's *Gallathea*, Jonson's *Epicoene* was written for performance by the troupes of boy actors; in Jonson's case by the Children of the Queen's Revels performing at the Whitefriars Theatre. Indeed, in 1609-10 *Epicoene* was one of the first plays performed at the newly refurbished theatre, the so-called 'Second Whitefriars.' The First Whitefriars, as Mary Bly (2000:3) has reminded us, ran for only nine months from 1607-8, and had a 'strikingly abnormal repertoire,' plays full of sexually aware and assertive virgins, and with a heavy use of homoerotic puns. Bly sees this short-lived company as engaged in 'the construction of erotic minorities' (p.17) – perhaps, contrary to the scholarship of Alan Bray and his followers, constructing a gay community in early seventeenth-century London. For Bly, this highly untypical company and repertoire gives us a valuable insight into 'how desire is organised in the early modern period' (p.17). When the first Whitefriars company collapsed in 1608 and the second reopened in 1610, playwrights for the later company had the choice of catering for the homoerotically-orientated audience of the earlier playhouse, or decisively distancing themselves from that audience. Jonson, it could be argued, inventively does both. I shall be discussing *Epicoene* as a play that thematises its circumstances of performance, making the nature of the boy, the conditions of the playhouse occupied by the boy troupe, and the nature of performance itself, part of its theme. It does this through discussions and negotiations of public and private spaces, and also through its parallel treatment of gendered bodies.

When the play begins, Clerimont 'comes out, making himself ready' (1.i., initial SD) followed by the Boy who is his servant. Immediately the problematic relationship between private and public spaces is raised. What have Clerimont and the Boy been doing in the private room beyond audience sight? We have, as it were, the choice between an innocent and an experienced answer. Clerimont is dressing with the aid of his servant; or Clerimont and the Boy have been having sex. The sexual ambiguity of the Boy is kept before our eyes throughout the scene. He visits the 'college of ladies' and is 'the welcom'st thing under a man that comes there' (1.i.8-9); the ladies even attempt to dress him as a woman. When Clerimont's friend Truewit arrives, he suggests that Clerimont's relationship with the Boy is not simply that of master and servant, imagining Clerimont 'between his

mistress abroad and his ingle at home' (I.i.23-4).² This particular Boy, and the boy actor generically, is thus drawn as a liminal figure, sexually ambiguous but erotically charged to both male and female viewers. This liminality is emphasised by the use of and reference to doors in this scene – the 'door' is shut against Clerimont though the Boy can enter the college of ladies (I.i.18), women dress when 'the doors are shut' against men (I.i.109), and Sir Dauphine Eugenie's uncle Morose, who has an obsessive hatred both of noise and of his nephew, is frequently associated with doors (e.g. I.i.156).

The first act of the play, then, establishes an interlocking set of binary oppositions – art / nature; public / private; city / court; male / female. These opposites are crucial to the way the play's characters define their world; but having defined these oppositions clearly and sharply, the play then proceeds to transgress and even deconstruct them. The transgression of boundaries – including boundaries of sex and gender – is a recurrent theme of the play. There are separate spheres of men and women, but the boundaries are permeable: the Boy at least can enter when the doors are shut to the rest of the men. The ladies of the college usurp 'masculine, or rather hermaphroditical, authority' (I.i.76): Mistress Otter, for instance, rules her husband as his 'princess' (III.i.1) who 'commands all at home' (I.iv.25-6).

Public and private – to use two key words of the play – spheres are also separate, opposite, but likewise permeable. Women according to Truewit should 'publicly' (I.i.105) admit to using art to assist nature, though the actual processes of self-construction should take place in 'private' (I.i.106). The terms 'man' / 'men' and 'woman' / 'lady' echo through this first scene – man/men some 15 times in 180 lines. There seems an urgent desire – a result, perhaps, of what Mark Breitenberg (1995) calls 'anxious masculinity' – to define men and women as very different, indeed opposite. Yet at almost every turn, this opposition is more slippery, the boundaries less clear-cut, than seems the case. Jonson, it could be argued, plays with the very contradiction at the heart of Jacobean sexology with which I began: that gender difference is both substantial and innate but also unfixed and permeable. These slippages are dramatised in a whole range of ways – through names, for instance, for not only Mistress Epicoene herself but also Lady Centaur and Mistress Otter are deliberately given names that suggest hybridity, and Sir Dauphine Eugenie is given a name which the scholarly Jonson must have known is feminine in form. But doors and windows, and delineations of different kinds of spaces, are also crucial.

The play's patriarch is Morose, the uncle of Sir Dauphine Eugenie, and a typical Jonsonian humours character dominated by his pathological dislike of noise. In order to prevent him from disinheriting his nephew, the

² 'Ingle,' of course, = 'catamite, boy' (Beaurline ed.: 1966:8).

three young men manipulate him into marrying 'Mistress Epicoene,' who appears to be a silent and compliant young woman but after marriage turns out to be a noisy and bossy virago. Distraught, Morose promises his nephew an income if he can extricate him from this marriage, which he does by revealing that Epicoene is not a woman at all but a boy. Morose's patriarchal and economic power would seem to define him as masculine, but, to quote Stephen Orgel again, that is not a simple term or proposition:

Manhood was not a natural condition but a condition to be striven for and maintained only through constant vigilance ... The fear of effeminization is a crucial element in all discussions of what constitutes a "real man" in the period ... everyone in this culture was in some respects a woman, feminized in relation to someone ... this is a world in which masculinity is always in question. (1996:19,26,124,153)

Morose appears to be the patriarch, owner of the house: he is certainly repeatedly associated with his 'long sword' (II.i.156, IV.ii.106 SD), which forms a ludicrous and ineffective phallic symbol. However, his role seems strangely feminised since like a woman he occupies a private sphere within the house rather than taking a mature masculine public role. A real man, we learn elsewhere, should not remain 'i' your chamber' but should go 'abroad' to 'public shows' (IV.i.51-4): this is how a man learns about the world and thus constructs a patriarchal identity. (Romeo, we will remember, worries his family by confining himself 'private in his chamber' rather than taking a manly role in the outdoor world of Verona. Heubert 1997:34) Because Morose fails to assume a fully masculine public role but remains within a feminised private sphere, his attempt to maintain the clean proper body – of himself or his house – is always hilariously doomed to failure.

So that noise cannot enter, Morose lives in 'a street ... so narrow at both ends' (I.i.158-9), which forms a kind of hilarious parody of the clean proper female body that Morose cannot maintain there. He lives in a room 'with double walls, and treble ceilings,' with the windows 'close shut and caulked' (I.i.175-6). Morose, indeed, is obsessed with doors and windows – 'windores,' as Jonson tends to put it, to echo its similarity to doors. Morose is fighting a losing battle to maintain the integrity of his own doors and windows – when he first appears, indeed, he is talking of ways of keeping the doors closed and quiet, though completely in vain since Truewit bursts noisily in.

Where Morose goes wrong is allowing the allegedly silent woman Epicoene into his house. She instantly starts to talk of it as '*my* house ... a family where I govern' (III.iv.49-50), and becomes Morose's 'regent ... Penthesilea ... Semiramis' (III.iv.51-2). While Morose continues to attempt to bar his doors against the outside world, she insists that they stand 'open,'

refusing to be 'barr'd' (III.v.35, 37). The open door and the sexual openness of the body which it images define Epicoene as the antithesis of the good wife or woman; and Morose's failure to maintain authority over his own house by opening or closing its doors marks the failure of patriarchal masculinity.

Parallel to the open door and the open body is also the open mouth. When she speaks and simply by the fact of speech, Epicoene becomes 'masculine and loud' (IV.i.8-9). The play implies, indeed, that language belongs to men, and that female speech is transgressive and disorderly by definition. Morose's phobia about noise does not extend to himself, for 'all discourses but my own afflict me' (II.i.3-4), and he insists that his social inferiors address him only with 'signs and ... silence' (II.ii.34). 'Silence in woman is like speech in man' (II.iii.109), as the poem has it – 'female vice should be a virtue male' (II.iii.13). Unlike women, men should not be 'dumb' (I.ii.1) or 'mute' (II.iv.17). Earlier, Truewit in defining 'fashionable men' sees one of their key qualities the ability to 'speak aloud' (I.i.38,35). Here 'speak' clearly means, as Beaurline (1966:8) defines it, to 'speak or sound aloud,' but the obscene pun on 'speak' as to ejaculate would not have been lost on the sophisticated private theatre audience. Male language and male sexuality are, therefore, intimately connected, and both are also associated with open spaces, and an orientation to the outside world, while women's bodies and language are associated with female sexuality as passive, enclosed, and orientated towards domestic interiority.

However, these linguistic and bodily spheres are constantly transgressed in this play, and in any case the fact that the poem in praise of female silence is written by the ludicrous John Daw might suggest that the truth is more complex. Daw, the 'only talking sir' (I.ii.64) is feminine in his pointless talkativeness, and so is Amorous La Foole, who lacks discretion in his language but will distract a lawyer in the middle of a case or a lady who is dancing in a masque (I.iii.30-1). Even men, who have license to talk, have to be careful about the appropriateness of their language: Dauphine for instance fears that Clerimont is a 'strange open man' for revealing their plan to Truewit. At the end of the play the young man who has played the role of Epicoene proves his ability to be secret since he 'can speak so well of his silence' (V.iv.228-9). Open and closed mouths and other spaces are crucial to the play, though their gender signals are not always simple ones.

In the central section of the play words like 'in' or 'within' and 'without' become important. Morose seeks to maintain strict boundaries between the secure and enclosed world of his house and the terrifying outside world, but the distinction rapidly becomes untenable. Between the collegiate ladies arguing 'within' and Otter's trumpeters 'without' (III.vii.37, 42), Morose is 'tormented' (IV.i.1) to the point of madness. As a result he

completely leaves the civilised commonwealth of the house and is seen 'i' th' top of the house ... sitting over a crossbeam o' the roof' (IV.i.20-2). Morose complains that they 'have rent my roof, walls, and all my windores asunder' (IV.ii.115). He tries to reappropriate 'my house ... my doors' (IV.ii.107-10) by threatening his tormentors with a long sword, 'a huge long naked weapon' (IV.iii.2-3), but this comic version of his masculinity is completely ineffective, and Morose is left with no alternative but, for once, to run 'out o' doors' (IV.v.3) to seek advice.

As Morose's claims to patriarchal authority as lord of the domestic commonwealth are undermined, so are those of Otter and of Morose's parallels, Sir John Daw and Sir Amorous La-Foole. Before Otter married, he only knew lords and ladies because he has seen them through the 'windore' of the Banqueting House (III.1.44). As pretenders to cultural and sexual capital Daw and La Foole are doomed to defeat and humiliation, and as in the case of Morose, this is defined through spatial metaphors and especially closed and open spaces inappropriately used. La Foole, a 'mannikin' (I.iii.24) rather than a man, invites guests to dine by shouting 'out of his windore as they ride by in coaches' (I.iii.33).

In Act IV, the young gallants rerun the duel scene from *Twelfth Night* in a satirical mode, persuading both Daw and La Foole that the other is a manly man about to challenge them to a duel, and humiliating both through their cowardice and their willingness to accept punishment to save their own lives. Again, physical architectural space is crucial to the dramatisation of their transgression of the protocols of masculinity. In Act Four the gallants wander about 'this gallery, or rather lobby' which has a 'couple of studies' – enclosed spaces – at each end (IV.v.26-7). Daw and La Foole are each persuaded to be 'lock'd in' safely into the feminine enclosed space, ostensibly to protect them and prevent 'public disgrace' (IV.v.75-6) but actually to humiliate them where they can be seen by us in the audience and by the women. To save their lives, the cowards are prepared to risk mutilation, the loss of an arm, teeth or lips. As the gallants draw increasingly violent pictures of their opponents to each of the men, the physical structure of the house is increasingly alluded to, and phrases like 'i' th' house' and 'out o' the house' are repeated. In addition the locking and unlocking, opening and closing of doors become important, especially as they define spaces as private or public. The two cowards agree to take punishment 'in private' and to be 'lock'd up' (IV.v.253,294), but the joke is of course that the scene is actually staged as a public performance not only to us but to the women, who view it from above and recognise them for what they are, drawing comparisons with 'the French hermaphrodite' (IV.vi.27). Daw and La-Foole's swords are confiscated, too, marking, as Beaurline (1966:xv) points out, a kind of 'ritual castration,' which is completed by the end of the

play when they both claim to have slept with Epicoene before marriage, though both are obviously ignorant of 'her' true sex.

A number of these motifs recur in the climactic scenes in Act Five where Morose gradually learns the truth about his bride. Like Daw and La Foole, Morose is willing to undergo bodily mutilation to escape – 'loss of an eye ... a hand, or any other member,' even to 'geld [him]self' (IV.iv.7-9). The clean proper body cannot exist in this world of the transgression of boundaries. In Act V Scene 4, where Morose's anti-climax approaches, the collegiate women again talk of crossing boundaries by opening and closing doors – about peeping through doors (V.iv.14) or thrusting men 'out of doors' (V.iv.10), thereby proving that they transgress gender boundaries and are a 'mankind generation' (V.iv.20). Like Daw and La Foole, Morose must undergo a 'public' exposure (V.iv.39), and like them he undergoes a kind of ritual castration as he confesses 'I am no man' (V.iv.40). This line resonates in all kind of ways. It is fictionally true, as Morose denies his masculinity to escape noise and marriage. It is literally true, since the speaker is indeed no man but a boy. But possibly more is being said, since the play seems to challenge the very possibility of an authentic masculinity.

Unlike Shakespearian comedy, this play does not end with marriages, which celebrate the heterosexual economy and thus bring about social and personal rebirth. The heterosexual economy is not reaffirmed; indeed, neither authentic masculinity nor femininity seems to exist. Mistress Epicoene is a boy, and Mistress Otter and the collegiate women transgress proper gender boundaries. La Foole, Daw and Morose undergo ritual castrations; Otter is dominated by his wife; Dauphine, with his mistress abroad and his ingle at home, is both within and without the heterosexual economy; and in Act Five it is symbolically significant that Clerimont has no pen (V.1.11), though at the end of Act V Dauphine manages to find a pen with which Morose can sign the document ceding to him his inheritance.

At the end of the play we are, perhaps, reminded of the other seventeenth-century meaning of that much repeated word 'house' – not Morose's domestic space but the playhouse where the performance is even at that moment going on. As true identities and true genders are revealed, the fictional private world of Morose's house gives way to the ambiguously private public space of the elite playhouse. As Truewit speaks the last lines, he negotiates the gap between these two kinds of spaces. The play, with its discussion of 'public' and 'private' spaces, to reiterate two words much used in the play, engages not only with discussions about gender, but also with the debate about the respective importance and nature of the public commercial playhouses and the more elitist spaces of the private playhouse. ('Private' was the word used in the period for the enclosed theatres of the boy companies, as in *The Roaring Girl* II.i.151.) Indeed, the play's true subject

could be seen as its own performance by sexually ambiguous performers in a space which is ambiguously both public and private. The play could readily be read as maintaining a view of gender as primarily performative in ways which would be recognised by Judith Butler (1990) or Laura Levine (1994). The boy performs femininity with great aplomb; rather better, indeed, than Morose or Daw or La Foole enact masculinity. Gender is not innate or inevitable, it seems, but is the result of social construction. Mrs Otter, for instance, is a kind of hybrid figure built out of commodities of the city, 'She takes herself asunder still when she goes to bed, into some twenty boxes ... like a great German clock' (IV.ii.87-9).

Jonson, then, negotiates between the two contradictory paradigms of gender available to him. On the one hand, gender difference is substantial and innate, and male and female roles and status are naturally different. Men have rights to language whereas women's language is disorderly; female bodies are leaky vessels. On the other hand, the one-sex model suggests that slippage and transformation are easy and inevitable, and that gender may be almost entirely performative and constructed rather than biologically determined and innate. The play invokes an ideology of binary opposition, but shows that constantly transgressed as boys play girls, women adopt 'mankind' roles, and young men enact bisexual identities. At the centre of these contradictions is the figure of the boy, who Orgel (1996:63) argues represents 'a middle term between men and women,' a figure who 'destabilize[s] the categories, and question[s] what it means to be a man or a woman.' This destabilization of categories, the transgression of the 'least certain of boundaries,' are performed to a surprising extent through spatial metaphors, closed and open spaces, doors and windows, thresholds, public and private spaces.

References

- Amussen, S. D. 1988: *An Ordered Society: Gender and Class in Early Modern England*. Oxford, Basil Blackwell.
- Armstrong, N. 1987: *Desire and Domestic Fiction*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Bach, R. A. 1998: The Homosocial Imaginary of *A Woman Kill'd with Kindness*. *Textual Practice* 12: 503-24.
- Beaurline, L.A. ed. 1966: *Ben Jonson: Epicoene; or, the Silent Woman*. Lincoln, Nebraska, Regents Renaissance Drama.
- Bly, M. 2000: *Queer Virgins and Virgin Queans on the Early Modern Stage*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Bray, A. 1982: *Homosexuality in Renaissance England*. London, Gay Men's Press.

- Breitenberg, M. 1995: *Anxious Masculinity in Early Modern England*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Butler, J. 1990: *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London, Routledge.
- Comensoli, V. 1999: 'Household Business': *Domestic Plays of Early Modern England*. Toronto, University of Toronto Press.
- Crooke, H. 1616: *Mikrokosmographia*. London, W. Jaggard.
- Elyot, T. 1531: *The Boke named the Governour*. London, Thomas Berthelet.
- Findlay, A. 1999: *A Feminist Perspective on Renaissance Drama*. Oxford, Basil Blackwell.
- Fletcher, A. 1995: *Gender, Sex and Subordination in England 1500-1800*. London, Yale University Press.
- Friedman, A. T. 1989: *House and Household in Elizabethan England: Wollaton Hall and the Willoughby Family*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- Hart, L. 1989: *Making a Spectacle: Feminist Essays on Contemporary Women's Theatre*. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press.
- Heubert, Ronald 1997: Privacy: the early social history of a word. *Sewanee Review* CV: 21-38.
- Huebert, Robert 2001: The Gendering of Privacy. *The Seventeenth Century* XVI: 37-67.
- Hughes, D. 2001: *The Theatre of Aphra Behn*. Basingstoke, Palgrave.
- Jankowski, T. 1996: 'Where there can be no cause of affection': redefining virgins, their desires and their pleasures in John Lyly's *Gallathea*. > Traub, V, Kaplan, M. L. and Callaghan, D. eds. *Feminist Readings of Early Modern Culture: Emerging Subjects*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 253-274.
- Keble, J. ed. 1888: *Works of Richard Hooker*. Oxford Clarendon Press.
- Laqueur, T. 1990: *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*. London: Harvard University Press.
- Levine, L. 1994: *Men in Women's Clothing: Anti-Theatricality and Effeminization 1579-1642*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Mulholland, P. ed. 1987: *Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker, The Roaring Girl*. Manchester, Manchester University Press.
- Orgel, S. 1996: *Impersonations: the Performance of Gender in Shakespeare's England*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press
- Orlin, L. C. 1994: *Private Matters and Public Culture in Post-Reformation England*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press.
- Paster, G. K. 1993: *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press.
- Pearson, J. 2001: 'An emblem of themselves, in plum or pear': Poetry, the Female Body, and the Country House. > Smith, B and Appelt, U eds.: *Write or be Written; Early Modern Women Poets and Cultural Constraints*. Aldershot and Burlington, Ashgate Press: 87-104.
- Scragg, L. ed. 1997: *John Lyly: Selected Prose and Dramatic Work*. Manchester, Carcanet Press.

- Shaver, A ed. 1999: *The Convent of Pleasure and other Plays: Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Warnicke, R. 1993: Private and Public: the Boundaries of Women's Lives in Early Stuart England. *Privileging Gender in Early Modern England*, Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies XXIII: 123-140.
- White, M ed. 1982: *Arden of Faversham*. London, New Mermaids.
- Wilson Verity, A. ed. 1888: *Thomas Heywood*. London, Mermaid.

Author's address:

University of Manchester
Department of English and American Studies
Manchester M13 9PL, Great Britain
jackie.pearson@man.ac.uk