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Introduction

For he knows poet never credit gained
By writing truths, but things (like truths) well feigned.
If any yet will (with particular sleight
Of application) wrest what he doth write,
And that he meant or him or her will say:
They make a libel which he made a play.[1]

I account this world a tedious theatre,
For I do play a part in't 'gainst my will.[2]

The world's a stage on which all parts are played:[3]

One of the intriguing questions about dramatic representation is how far it corresponds to contemporary social mores and action and, especially, how far we can retrieve from it aspects of "low" dialogue. The issue is particularly germane for speech in the texts. The complications are undeniably difficult. At all times, even in collaborative enterprise, competition (critical or benign) about poetic prowess obtained between the dramatists. When composing works as individuals rather than collaboratively, the playwrights had a self-awareness which extended to self-referential allusion to their other works. This display of their intellectual ability extended to comments on the poets generically and even, by implication, individually.[4]

During the war of the poets, that disputation was especially enhanced. Jonson in particular had an immense desire to denounce his critics as inferior, with a lower understanding of the Aristotelian

unities.[5] His self-representation as Horace in *Poetaster*, in a classical context, was designed to humiliate the other "poets", Homer's adversaries (especially Crispinus, that is, Marston) in the play.[6] He was also, nonetheless, playfully self-referential too, particularly in the several *Intermeans* in *The Staple of News*, in which the "audience" criticized the dullness of the main play, despising the author as a "paltry poet".[7] Undoubtedly, Jonson's device here was multi-faceted, critiquing popular expectations of plays, with a fool and devil, perhaps defensively protecting his deviation from the popular form, or alluding in circumlocution to his own erudition. So at all times, we must be cautious less about poetic license than poetic self-fashioning.[8]

In Chapter 3, below, are addressed some of the other sources for social dialogue, such as court records, and their imperfections. The alternative material in life-writing is generally unavailable before the middle of the seventeenth century, although there is a limited number of texts for the early seventeenth century. The conundrum of this source is well rehearsed: the concealed rhetoric of the form; issues of self-presentation; self-revelation; personal judgment of self-worth; evolving identities; conformity to convention; biblical reflection and appropriation; the impact of office-holding on the sense of propriety; the influence of conduct books on self-consciousness; and, perhaps, an imagined readership.[9]

Plays were composed, moreover, in response to other plays, as allusion or counter. Inter-textuality involved cross reference between plays by the same and different authors.[10] Some plays were produced as parodies of other dramas. Several plays acquired the basis of their narratives from popular literature, as in the main plot of *Witch of Edmonton,* which was assumed from the pamphlet composed by Henry Goodcole, *The Wonderful Discovery of Elizabeth Sawyer a Witch, Late of Edmonton* (1621).[11] Several allusions are made by the collaborative authors to earlier (*Gammer Gurton's Nedle*) and contemporary (*Moll Cutpurse* [by Dekker and Middleton, *c*.1611], *Bartholomew Fair* [by Jonson, 1614]) plays.[12] Dekker was directly involved in the production of the pamphlet literature, including, of interest here, *The Gull's Handbook* (1609).[13] One commentator has described some of these texts as "journalistic plays", reflecting on recent real events.[14] Irascible as ever, Jonson disdained Greene, a

scholar-poet, educated at Cambridge, through a less than complimentary reference in *Epicoene*. When Haughty refers to cures through the *Sick Man's Salve* and *Greene's Groats Worth of Wit*, Truewit responds: "A very cheap cure, madam".[15]

The problem which pervades any discussion of audience response is "distance", the subjective "balancing of stage and other worlds".[16] Whilst that issue remains, for early-modern theater, something of an insoluble issue, some sensitive playwrights, through meta-theatrical devices, such as intermeans and interludes, partially addressed the "distance" between and external reality, and between performance and expectations, for which, see further below.[17]

Much literature has been produced about the theaters and their relationship to the liberties of the City.[18] We are then disposed to consider the plays as performed exclusively in the theaters from the 1570s. The plays examined here were, indeed, enacted in the theaters in the City and the liberties. Before the establishment of the theaters, players were itinerant and performed in households. An interesting sidelight is the continued reference to plays in households in the comedies. Thus, Sir La Foole is derided for his exuberant social display, which included shouting from the window of his house in The Strand inviting passers-by in their coaches to dinner and plays in this house which he retained for this purpose.[19] One of the mischievous strategies of Follywit with his band of never-do-wells is to arrive at the country house of Sir Bounteous pretending to be the itinerant players of Lord Owemuch.[20] The gentry house of Sir Bounteous was located in the Midlands, according to his pronouncements about the merits of Lincolnshire as against Bedfordshire thieves. The improvised masque or comedy created by the Poet in *The Jovial Crew* was performed in a gentry household in Nottinghamshire.[21]

The foundation of the essays below are the dramatic ventures of three playwrights in particular who collaborated and contended with each other in productions for the theater in the City and who engaged directly and unequivocally with social commentary.

Thomas Dekker (ca.1572-1632)
Ben Jonson (1572-1637)
Thomas Middleton (ca.1570-1623)

Intermittently, allusions are made to their other main contemporaries: Francis Beaumont; John Fletcher; Thomas Heywood (ca.1570-1641); John Marston (1576-1634); and William Rowley (ca.1585-1637). When other playwrights are mentioned (Richard Brome, for example), some biographical details are provided in that place.

The discussion below is based on plays which were (intended to be) performed in public venues, in the open theaters which were established from the foundation of *The Theater* in 1576 and the closure of these venues in 1642. Although some public places existed previously, in inn yards for example, and whilst there was some continuation of playing after 1642, the concern is with the openly accessible material which the official public theaters provided.[22] The epithets of the "popular stage" and "popular drama" have been applied to these venues and performances.[23] The plays considered comprise all of comedy, tragi-comedy and tragedy. The preponderance of the plays performed by the boys' companies comprised comedy, some eighty-five percent, mostly satires expounding social critiques. The City comedies can, nonetheless, be divided into those which were satires and those (mainly by Dekker) which were celebrations. Those plays–cautiously appraised–reveal much about social attitudes.[24] For some purposes, however, it is important to consider also the other two sub-genre, not least for the evaluation of vocabulary (as above). One of the complications is the potential change which occurred in the composition of audiences. Whilst initially the audiences at the public theaters were mixed, composed of all social groups, there was later a tendency to some extent for the withdrawal of some of the gentry into private theaters, which had a greater social cachet associated with more expensive prices for admission.[25]

As a matter of necessity, Chapter 1 engages with the deployment of poetic devices in the plays to explain the caution which should be borne in mind when extracting from the stage aspects of social existence. Secondly, a close analysis is undertaken of the use of specific words in the texts which illuminate social attitudes. Finally, estimates are produced of the wider vocabulary of playwrights (Jonson, and Beaumont and Fletcher) for comparative purposes and to illuminate how the poets' language related to "ordinary" language.

A particular aspect of language use is considered in Chapter 2, which analyses in more detail the meanings of "to fashion" and "fashion". The discussion here is, however, mainly concerned with the symbolic importance of the flat cap for the citizens of London. Anachronistically, Jonson used the symbol of the flat cap in *Poetaster*, when Chloë, of gentle birth, complains "'twere my fortune to marry a flat-cap", although the ostensible setting of the play is classical Rome.[26] This difference between spouses leads on to the question of conjugal conversations.

In Chapter 3, marital relationships are dissected from the material in the City Comedies. One of the many conundrums in the discussion is the relative influences on the patience of Candido in *Honest Whore*. It is possible that there was a combination of Stoicism and Puritanism, the latter informed by the former. Jonson divulges this possible connection in *New Inn*, when Tipto remarks to Fly: "thou art an exact professor, Lipsius Fly". In defining Fly further, Tipto comments that Fly is "a rare bird in his profession", with a "tall and growing gravity", and his "own Dictamen and genius".[27] It is Fly, indeed, described by Beaufort as "vicar-general", who performs the marriage ceremony between Beaufort and Frank (actually Laetitia) in the stable of the *New Inn*.[28] The association is also established by Clerimont declaring: "and leave this Stoicity alone till thou mak'st sermons".[29] Similarly, when Rabbi Busy is condemned to the stocks, Quarlous rhetorically asks: "What's here? A Stoic i' the stocks?" "Rabbi" referred, of course, to Busy's Puritanism, as did his moniker, and his speeches are mostly concerned with his "sigh and groan for the reformation of these abuses" of the heathens.[30] The connection with contemporary Stoicism is established, perhaps, by Lollio's question to Isabella whether she has read Lipsius.[31] One treatise of Lipsius at issue is *On Constancy*, published in 1584 by Plantin, expressing a "Christianized neostoicism".[32]

The social metaphors of money are considered in Chapter 4, aligned around the bimetallic coinage. When Cokes loses his first purse to a cut-purse, he is offended by the crime, but puts it down to simple experience of Bartholomew Fair. The loss was of no consequence to him, since ''Twas but a little scurvy white money."[33] Silver coin–low denomination–did not matter too much to him. He resolved to tempt the cut-purses with his other purse, containing

gold, by which he hoped to catch the culprits. In such a manner, social distinction is demarcated in the City Comedies.

The interest in monetary matters is continued in Chapter 5, which commences with the expectations in *Eastward Ho* about the rewards which would accrue from the Virginian venture of Sir Petronel, urged on by Quicksilver. Jonson's main plot concentrates on their aspirations which went awry. In fact, their vision of Virginian society and credit arrangements were complete delusions.

In chapter 6, the language of the North is considered. The dramatists attempted to represent language and dialect in their plays, especially the comedies, which were occasionally set in the "provinces" or involved characters who had recently migrated to the City. When Ferret recited a hackneyed verse, the Host decried "your scurril dialect".[34] Dialect was, then, to some extent associated with social group as much as regionalism.[35] Perhaps we assume that dialects had become levelled and comprehensible by the evolution of Chancery Standard and the dominance of East Midlands dialect in the later middle ages.[36]

Finally, drama is extended to include the cockfight (Chapter 7), but in the context of the assertion of Sir Bounteous that he is still the cock of the heap with his spurs. The cockfight was another "popular" spectacle, which all "sorts" of people attended. The cockfight has also been conceived as communicating cultural significance to the actors, representing either an homologous culture of a whole society or confirming masculinity. In fact, of course, the cockfight had multiple meanings, depending on situations and circumstances.

> Be of myself in keeping this Light Heart,
> Where I imagine all the world's a play;
> The state of men's affairs, all passages,
> Of life to spring new scenes, come in, go out,
> And shift and vanish; …[37]

Notes

[1] *Epicoene, Another Prologue*, lines 9-14.
[2] *Duchess of Malfi*, Act IV, scene i, lines 81-2.
[3] *Game at Chess*, Act V, scene ii, line 19.

[4] Some of the analytical content here was stimulated by Crystal, "*Think on My Words*".

[5] Scott-Warren, *Early Modern English Literature*, 121-4 on the exemplary unity of action, time and place in Jonson's *Alchemist*; Gordon Williams, "Mediation and Contestation: English Classicism from Sidney to Jonson", in *Renaissance Poetry*, ed. Christine Malcolmson (Harlow: Longman, 1998), 178-202.

[6] *Poetaster*: Jonson's satirical retort to Marston and Dekker in 1601; Bruster, *Shakespeare and the Question of Cultur*e, 69.

[7] *Staple of News*, Second Intermean, line 44.

[8] For the fool, Robert Wilcher, "The Art of the Comic Duologue in Three Plays by Shakespeare", in *Shakespeare and Language*, ed. Catherine M. S. Alexander (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[9] Michelle M. Dowd and Julie A. Eckerlie, "Recent Studies in Early Modern English Life Writing", *English Literary Renaissance* 40 (2010): 132-62. In fact, in *Volpone*, Jonson satirizes the journal keeping by Sir Politic: Act IV, scene ii, lines 133-46.

[10] Bruster, *Shakespeare and the Question of Culture*, 167-90 (chapter 7).

[11] *Witch of Edmonton*, 3-4.

[12] *Gammer Gurton's Nedle*, 207-89.

[13] Goodman, *British Drama before 1660*, 182; Anna Bayman, "Rogues, Conycatching and the Scribbling Crew", *History Workshop Journal* 63 (2007): 1-17; McLuskie, *Dekker & Heywood*, 71.

[14] Clarke, *Renaissance Drama*, 63-83 (chapter 4).

[15] *Epicoene*, Act IV, scene iv, lines 95-7.

[16] Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* (2nd edn., New York: Routledge, 2001), 15, critiquing Chaim and Grotowski.

[17] Scott-Warren, *Early Modern English Literature*, 110-12 for the metatheatricality of *Knight of the Burning Pestle*, which had the purpose of both blurring fiction and reality, but in the process criticizing that very reality.

[18] Mullaney, *Place of the Stage*.

[19] *Epicoene*, Act I, scene iii, lines 33-5.

[20] *Mad World*, Act V, scene i.

[21] *Jovial Crew*, Act IV, scene ii, lines 170-220; Act V, scene i, lines 250-391.

[22] Goodman, *British Drama before 1660*, 9, for continuity after 1642, and 156 for the opening in 1576; Mullaney, *Place of the Stage*, 27, for 1576 and public playhouses; Goodman, *Renaissance Drama*, 1, for 1576; Dillon, *Cambridge Introduction to Early English Theatre*, 44-6, for "fixed" theater from 1576. For courtyards as permanent play stages in the 1560s and 1570s, Scott-Warren, *Early Modern English Literature*, 103.

[23] Mullaney, *The Place of the Stage*, vii, 8-9.

[24] Mullaney, *The Place of the Stage*, 53; for comic modes, Daryl W. Palmer, *Hospitable Performances: Dramatic Genre and Cultural Practices in Early Modern England* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1992), 89-93.

[25] Gurr, *Shakespearean Stage*. For women in the audience, and how they might react or be addressed, Kathleen McLuskie, *Renaissance Dramatists* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), 87-99.

[26] *Poetaster*, Act II, scene i, lines 88-9.

[27] *New Inn*, Act III, scene i, lines 33, 45-53.

[28] *New Inn*, Act V, scene iv, lines 41-2.

[29] *Epicoene*, Act I, scene i, lines 59-60.

[30] *Bartholomew Fair*, Act IV, scene vi, lines 74-109.

[31] *Changeling*, Act III, scene iii, lines 183-4.

[32] Perez Zagorin, *Ways of Lying: Dissimulation, Persecution and Conformity in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 123; Scott-Warren, *Early Modern English Literature*, 234-6, for Lipsius and Neo-Stoic emphasis on constancy and patience as virtues.

[33] *Bartholomew Fair*, Act II, scene vi, line 125.

[34] *New Inn*, Act I, scene iii, line 13.

[35] Jonathan Hope, "Shakespeare and Language: An Introduction", in *Shakespeare and Language*, ed. Alexander, 6-7.

[36] Laura Wright, ed., *The Development of Standard English 1300-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). For an overview of the tension between Standard English and dialect and between dialects, Adam Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England 1500-1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 51-111.

[37] *New Inn*, Act I, scene iii, lines 127-32; for the quotation from Shakespeare which has become a cliché, Jonathan Bate, *Soul of the Age: The Life, Mind and World of William Shakespeare* (London: Penguin, 2008), 1.