SUBVERSIVE MERIT: THE REVISION OF THE CLASSICAL CLEVER SLAVE AS WITTY SERVANT AND SOCIAL SATIRIST IN THE COMEDIES OF BEN JONSON

A dissertation presented

by

Cory Grewell

to

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

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Abstract

This dissertation argues that the key to Jonson’s revision of the classical comic paradigm is his employment of an unsettled and subversive English servant figure, derived literarily from the clever slave that is at the heart of the action in classical comedies, and employed by Jonson as an on-stage satirist. This character’s literary inheritance from the classical clever slave and his relationship to the contemporary stereotype of the English servant figure are explored in detail. The dissertation goes on to analyze the ways that Jonson uses these servant figures to expose and ridicule vices specific to the social contexts of each of the comedies that it surveys. The analysis draws attention to cultural, economic and political currents in Elizabethan and Jacobean London and attempts to demonstrate how Jonson’s situating of what I call the satiric servant within a staged contemporary social milieu works to critique the social vices of his time. Most of the vices surveyed are either resultant from or closely related to the commercialization of patronage in the late Elizabethan and early Jacobean periods and the unprecedented social mobility that accompanied it. Jonson’s plays consistently deride the promotion of unworthy characters to positions of rank and honor on account of their wealth and lament the under-valuing of virtue in English society. Specific vices associated with the commercialization of patronage that come under attack are the selling of titles of honor and the marketing of projects and monopolies. The dissertation analyzes the development of the satiric servant character and its role in satirizing the specific vices of sixteenth and seventeenth century England over the entire course of Jonson’s career, beginning with the early humors comedies and extending through the Caroline plays, which Dryden famously labeled, the dotages. In its analysis, this project seeks to historicize Jonson’s use of classical comic dramaturgical methods for the purposes of social satire.
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In an essay on “Jonson’s Classicism,” written for *The Cambridge Companion to Ben Jonson*, John Mulryan describes the way that Ben Jonson appropriated the methods of classical poets in his own work as follows: “Take the wisdom of the ages, and hammer it into a new form appropriate to one’s own age” (168). Mulryan’s description of Jonson’s use of classical poetic paradigms is perhaps nowhere more accurate than it is in the comedies. For in the comedies, in order to remain true to what were seen as classical prescriptions for the moral effect of the genre – i.e. to expose typical social vices to dramatic ridicule, and thus represent them “in the most ridiculous and scornful sort that may be. So as it is impossible, that any beholder can be content to be such a one” (Sidney 176-77) – Jonson had to radically revise and update the dramaturgical standards of classical comedy so that they fit with the vices of Elizabethan and Jacobean England. Jonson’s dramatic task of keeping the moral spirit of classical comedy while making it applicable to contemporary audiences is articulated by the poet in the verse prologue to *Every Man in his Humor*, the first comedy included in the 1616 folio version of his *Works*. There, Jonson announces that his play will show,

\[
\ldots \text{deedes, and language, such as men doe vse:}
\]

\[
\text{And persons, such as Comœdie would chuse,}
\]

\[
\text{When she would shew an Image of the times,}
\]

\[
\text{And sport with humane follies, not with crimes.}
\]

\[
\text{Except, we make 'hem such by louing still}
\]

\[
\text{Our popular errors, when we know th’are ill. (21-28)}
\]
This announcement of matching the neoclassical moral effect of comedy with contemporary “popular errors” is repeated in some form or other in prefatory matter to nearly all of Jonson’s comedies. These announcements raise an interesting question for analysis of Jonson’s comic dramaturgy, namely, how does Jonson retain his claim to remain true to the methods of classical comedy and at the same time present a satire of contemporary cultural vice?

This dissertation attempts to answer that question by arguing that the key to Jonson’s revision of the classical comic paradigm in most of his comedies is his employment of an unsettled and subversive English servant figure, derived literarily from the clever slave that is at the heart of the action in classical comedies, and employed by Jonson as an on-stage satirist. The revision of this character into the satiric servant that is the main source of moral satire in most of Jonson’s comedies preserves the classical comic ethos in that the servant character recognizably retains the subversive and witty attributes of the stock clever slave. At the same time, the character is firmly grounded in the historical context of contemporary English society. The dissertation goes on to analyze the ways that Jonson uses these servant figures to expose and ridicule vices specific to the social contexts of each of the comedies that it surveys. The analysis draws attention to cultural, economic and political currents in Elizabethan and Jacobean London and attempts to demonstrate how Jonson’s situating of what I call the satiric servant within a staged contemporary social milieu works to critique the social vices of his time.

In its attempt to specifically historicize Jonson’s revision of the classical model, this dissertation bridges an important gap that exists both within Jonson criticism and between Jonson criticism and other criticism of Renaissance drama. This gap generally
exists between criticism that focuses on Jonson’s peculiar classicism as what Mulryan calls “a series of timeless, unvarying principles of conduct and thought” and criticism that focuses on the dramatic representation of Renaissance culture by Jonson and others as being historically conditioned (163). One of the critical tasks that I hope my dissertation accomplishes is to show specifically how “timeless” classical principles, especially as they are employed in the dramaturgy of Jonsonian comedy, are often directly conversant with sixteenth and seventeenth century English culture.

Another important contribution that this dissertation makes to Jonson criticism in its historicizing of his classical dramaturgy is to show the development of Jonson’s career as a comic dramatist in its social and historical context. Much Jonson criticism – good Jonson criticism at that – in tracing the development of the poet’s comic dramaturgy, ignores the social context to which, according to his own prefatory material, Jonson was speaking. Though their literary relationship to stock characters of classical comedy has been noted, insufficient attention has been paid to the development of the humors character types insofar as their “vices” reflect historically specific social trends in Elizabethan and Jacobean society. Moreover, it is important to note that the satiric servant himself (or herself, in the case of Prudence) is developed over the course of Jonson’s career in ways that allow him to most effectively expose and ridicule the errors of his particular social context. The attention that this dissertation gives to specific historical developments in English culture over the course of Jonson’s life and their relation to the particular satiric instruction in each of his comedies, I believe, begins to meet an important need in Jonson criticism for historicizing the developmental arc of his comic oeuvre.
The first chapter, “Clever Servants: The English Servant as Satirist,” sets the moral satire of Jonson’s early humors comedies in the context of late Elizabethan London social mobility and analyzes Jonson’s first revision of the clever slave type into the wily and subversive English servant, Brainworm, and it further explores the ways that Brainworm’s unsettled and kinetic scheming undermine the false poses of social rank and honor taken by the play’s gulls. The chapter also analyzes Jonson’s employment of the methods of Old Comedy in Every Man Out of his Humor as a way of critiquing social posturing on the part of stereotypical frauds and details the development of Carlo Buffone as a satirical servant character derived from both the Greek satyr and a contemporary English tavern railer.

The second chapter, “Corrupt Servants: The Servant as Subversive Threat to Social Order,” explores the use of the satiric servant characters, Quicksilver, Mosca, and Face in Jonson’s early Jacobean plays to indict the corrupt abuses of the commercialization of Jacobean patronage. It also examines the development of these satiric servants as corrupt threats to the social order, and argues that these threats are directly resultant from a cultural over-valuing of wealth and under-valuing of merit.

In chapter three, “Gullible Servants: The Satiric Servant as Dupe,” I examine the effect of Jonson’s inversion of the servant’s typical role in the comic plot – making the character one who is duped rather than the duper – in Bartholomew Fair and The Devil is an Ass, and I argue that the moral satire here is consonant with the particular sense of social disorder that characterized the middle years of James I’s reign. I examine the effects of challenges to traditional English authorities posed by Puritans, Parliamentarians, and a nascent merchant class as well as the growing corruption of
Jacobean patronage, and attempt to show that the quasi-medieval “holiday” chaos that forms the context for these plays is all too characteristic of everyday English society in the 1610s.

The final chapter, “Meritorious Servants: Virtuous Servants Rewarded,” analyzes what are commonly called Jonson’s “dotages,” the Caroline plays that were written after a nine year hiatus from the stage. In these plays, I argue, Jonson imagines fantasies of the meritocracy that his previous plays have shown to not exist in actual English culture. In these plays, the servant characters are recognized for their wit and virtue and are elevated to positions of rank and privilege, positions which their predecessors have satirized others for unworthily holding.

Three of Jonson’s major comedies have been left out of this study: *Cynthia’s Revels, Poetaster, and Epicene*. The simple and only reason that they have been excluded is that they do not contain a recognizable satiric servant figure, the figure which is the common thread and touchstone for the analysis of the satire in each of the plays considered here. Of course, the satiric methods of Jonson’s gallants – like Truewit in *Epicene* – and of his scholar-satirists – Crites in *Cynthia’s Revels* and Horace in *Poetaster* – are very similar to those of the satiric servants studied here. (And I would be remiss not to at least note that all of these satirist characters bear striking resemblances to Ben Jonson himself.) Nonetheless, the scope of the analysis I undertook for this dissertation was initially determined by the plays’ visible relation to classical comic plot structures, and, thus, the three plays mentioned above have been excluded, though there is undoubtedly fruitful work to be done in examining the relationship between their satirist characters and the servant satirists of these other plays.
Clever Servants: The English Servant as Satirist

At the close of the Folio version of Ben Jonson’s *Every Man in his Humor*, Justice Clement, after dispensing judgments on the play’s characters and inviting those pardoned of their follies to a wedding feast, at last turns to Brainworm and, with the play’s closing lines, commends him for the witty schemes by which he has brought the play’s action to its comic closure. “Brayne-worme!” says Clement, “to whom all my addresses of courtship shall have their reference. Whose adventures, this day, when our grandchildren shall heare to be made a fable, I doubt not, but it shall find both spectators, and applause” (5.5.87-91). Clement’s identification of Brainworm as the chief engineer of the play’s satiric plot, at first glance, seems to shortchange the major roles played in exposing and ridiculing the play’s gulls by the young gallants Edward Knoll Jr. and Wellbred. In light, however, of the resemblance Brainworm bears to the clever slaves whose schemes and machinations are at the heart of the comic action in ancient Roman comedies, and in light of the extent to which those ancient comedies serve as dramaturgical standards for Jonson’s early humors comedies, Clement’s commendation of the wily servant is not so surprising.

In the classical comedies upon which Jonson’s early comedies are modeled, the catalytic antics and schemes of the clever slave characters are of central importance to the comic plot. As classical scholar Erich Segal puts it in *Roman Laughter: The Comedy of Plautus*, “the Plautine slave is the essence of the comic spirit” (110). George Duckworth’s more comprehensive study, *The Nature of Roman Comedy*, also gives notice to the importance of the slave to Roman Comedy, pointing out, “Every extant Roman comedy contains at least one slave and many have several” (249). Within the
classical comic plot, the clever slave’s subversive antics and machinations are very often the catalysts that set in motion the plays’ outrageous catastrophes, which, in turn, provide much of festive “laughter of liberation” in these plays (Segal 9). The wily antics of the slave figures in classical comedy, though, can also be seen to serve a morally corrective function through their undermining and satirizing of corrupt social attitudes, such as the stereotypical excessive greed and repressiveness of the comedies’ *senex* figures.

Moreover, as Duckworth’s study notes, not every slave in Roman comedy is clever. Though the subversive and farcical “*seruus callidi,*” of Plautus’s plays especially, is, according to Duckworth, the most memorable of the Roman slave characters, not all slaves are the tricksters and intriguers that Tranio (*Mostellaria*), Chrysalus (*Bacchides*) and Pseudolus are (250). Some are more overtly loyal and scrupulous characters,¹ who serve less humorous purposes within the classical comedy, like “moralizing” and “exposition” (249, 251). This moralizing on the part of the non-clever slaves is often delivered in didactic, homiletic speeches, such as the sermon-in-miniature delivered by the slave Grumio to his clever and insubordinate counterpart Tranio in the opening scene of Plautus’s *Mostellaria* or the constant upbraiding of the wayward Pistoclerus by the mentor-slave Lydus in *Bacchides*. Like the subversive antics of the clever slaves, the moralizing exposition of slaves like Grumio and Lydus provides a satiric, if less humorous, commentary on typical vices of Roman life. Jonson’s early humors comedies, modeled as they are on these classical comic precedents, make use of both the subversive antics and the moralizing exposition of the Roman slave character in their revision of the comic type into a contemporary, Renaissance English servant figure.
Jonson’s servant characters combine and expand upon several dramatic traits of their Roman predecessors, particularly the tendencies towards subversive intrigue and moralizing commentary, tendencies which are particularly apropos to Jonson’s satiric strain of comedy. In his revision of classical comic paradigms, Jonson creates a distinctive “servant” character type, a literary descendant of the classical clever slave, that is integral to the comic intrigue plots in his plays, plots which expose the humors and vices of other characters, and thereby provide a satiric critique of “the follies of the time” (*Every Man Out of his Humor*, Induction 17). In the early humors comedies especially, Jonson capitalizes on the precedent established by the classical slave for subversive and farcical intrigue by creating servant characters that undermine and expose the fraudulent and hypocritical stances of elevated social status by their “superiors.” Brainworm’s antics, as will be demonstrated below, provide an exemplary illustration of Jonson’s revision of the comic character type for employment in social satire.\(^2\)

The development of the servant character in Jonson’s early comedies capitalizes not only on the literary inheritance of the stock character from ancient comedy, however, but also on attitudes and anxieties felt by Elizabethan gentility and middle classes towards the “subversive” mobility of real servant and apprentice classes at that time. Like the literary clever slave, the servant and apprentice classes in late sixteenth and early seventeenth century England were viewed by many as inherently subversive and threatening to the established order of social hierarchy. In the early humors comedies, therefore, Jonson builds on both of these subversive *ethoi* in the development of his clever servant figures, who in turn are employed dramatically to satirize the frauds, hypocrisies, and social inequities that, as his comedies illustrate, all too often
accompanied the unprecedented and commercialized social mobility of late sixteenth century English culture.

I

It has long been critical commonplace to note the influence of classicism on Jonsonian comedy, especially the early plays. A similarity in plot structure between *Every Man in his Humor* and a typical Roman New Comedy is noticed, for instance, by Anne Barton in her analysis of Jonson’s earliest humors comedy, *Ben Jonson, Dramatist*: “Although no specific Latin comedy operates as a source for *Every Man in his Humour*, as *Captivi* and the *Aulularia* had for *The Case is Altered*, vestiges of a Roman comedy plot involving the outwitting of the *senex*, a stolen marriage and the frolics of young men and their clever slaves do manifest themselves in Jonson’s play” (51). While the comic plot of *Every Man in his Humor* is built upon a Plautine structure, though, the feelings of festivity and mirth that classical comedy scholars like Segal and Dana Sutton have identified as accompanying the “frolics of young men and their clever slave” in ancient comedy give way in Jonson’s revision of the genre to a more satiric and morally corrective focus.

The focus on satire in early Jonsonian comedy results in the “comic spirit” in these plays being less evocative of a festive sense of ritual disorder and renewal than of a corrective spirit that entails exposure and ridicule of “vice.” This satiric revision of the Plautine comic formula in Jonson’s early humors comedies represents something of a conscious departure from the “festive” adaptation of Roman New Comedy produced by many of Jonson’s Elizabethan predecessors, Shakespeare, perhaps, the most notable among them. Shakespeare’s Elizabethan comedies, as C. L. Barber has famously argued
in *Shakespeare’s Festive Comedy*, emphasize the elements of communal renewal and “clarification” that result from temporary seasons of “festive” misrule, a misrule that, in the classical New Comedies that Shakespeare’s comedies often draw from, is often the result of the intrigue schemes of a clever slave. Barber asserts that Shakespeare “used the resources of a sophisticated theater to express, in his idyllic comedies and in his clowns’ [many of whom descend from clever slave types, themselves] ironic misrule, the experience of moving to humorous understanding through saturnalian release” (4). In Shakespearean comedy, the renewal of the community and “clarification” following the holiday misrule are often sealed by the successful consummation of the comedies’ romance plots. The capping of festive misrule with romantic consummation is also found in much Roman New Comedy. Thus, in the adaptations of the New Comic plot that are found in the Elizabethan comedies of Shakespeare and like-minded contemporaries – the festive romance plot of Robert Greene’s *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, culminating in the marriage of Lacy, the Earl of Lincoln, and Margaret, the fair maid of Fressingfield, comes to mind – the festive emphases on renewal and romance are preserved. In a New Comic plot like one at the center of *The Taming of the Shrew*, the subversive antics of the young gallant Lucentio and his clever servant Tranio and the temporary disorder they cause serve primarily to advance the romance plot that ends with the happy marriage of Lucentio to his love interest, Bianca, and the implicit renewal of the play’s community. Along the way, Tranio’s wiles may play upon the bumbling follies of the rival suitors Hortensio and Gremio, but the plot lays its emphasis on the triumph of romance and youth rather than the exposure of the follies of the rivals. Similarly, in *The Comedy of Errors*, which takes Plautus’s *Menaechmi* as its source, the disorder that forms the play’s
catastrophe serves to emphasize and affirm the comic triumph of family and social order in the play’s resolution rather than to indict any particularly vicious characters for being the cause of the catastrophic disorder. As Barber argues, this sort of festive emphasis on the triumph of community and renewal is typical of Shakespeare’s comic practice.

Jonson’s satiric adaptations of the Plautine plot, conversely, tend to emphasize the follies of the gulls rather than the romantic elements that lead to communal renewal. In *Every Man in his Humor*, for instance, though the clandestine marriage of the young gallant Ed Knowell to Mistress Bridget is the New Comic scaffolding upon which the play is erected, the substantive emphasis of the comedy is clearly on the exposure and ridicule of the play’s gulls, – Bobadil, Matthew, Stephen – and it is to this end that the subversive actions of the youths, Knowell and Wellbred, and especially the clever servant Brainworm are directed. The switch in emphasis from romantic renewal to exposure of folly, vice and affectation is distinctive of Jonson’s revision of the classical comic plot into what has become known as “humors comedy.”

Most critics of Jonsonian comedy agree that Jonson borrowed the concept of “humors” comedy from George Chapman’s 1597 comedy, *An Humorous Day’s Mirth.* Chapman’s play introduces the concept of comedy as a vehicle for staging stereotypical social follies in order to laugh at them. The comic plot of *An Humorous Day’s Mirth* is constructed almost entirely around the proposal by the young courtier Lemot to his companions that they give the day to the sport of observing the idiosyncratic vices and follies of various characters, all of whom are portrayed as being completely ruled by their particular “humors.” This comic structure is announced in the play’s second scene,
which opens with Lemot and his courtier friend Colonet in conversation regarding the prospects of the day ahead:

*Lemot.* How like thou this morning Colenet? What, shall we haue a faire day?

*Colonet.* The skie hangs full of humour, and I thinke we shall haue raine.

*Lemot.* Why raine is faire wether when the ground is dry and barren, especially when it raines humor, for then doe men like hot sparrowes and pigeons open all their wings ready to receiue them.

*Colonet.* Why then we may chance to haue a faire day, for we shall spend it with humorous acquaintance, as raines nothing but humor al their life time. (1.2.1-10)

Given the ripeness of the weather for excessive humors, Lemot and Colonet resolve to spend the day egging on and laughing at the peculiar follies of their “humorous acquaintance[s].” Lemot conclusively announces, “[T]hus will I sit, as it were, and point out all my humorous companions” (1.2.18-19). Champan’s comedy, like its classical and Elizabethan predecessors, employs the genre’s typical atmosphere of misrule – an atmosphere sparked by the subversive scheming of Lemot – but in the licentious atmosphere of Chapman’s “humorous day,” the comic emphasis is laid on the observation and ridicule of the humors of fools rather than the romantic renewal of a community. Chapman’s centralization within the comic plot of the exposure and ridicule of humorous vices becomes, as noted above, the *modus operandi* for Jonson’s satirically comic dramaturgy. In Jonson’s comedies, the humors satire is not only moved to the center of the plot but takes on a more explicitly corrective tone; the humors of Jonson’s
characters are depicted less as laughable foibles and more as inexcusable and ridiculous vices, vices which are too often, he argues, irresponsibly blamed on “humors.”

The bogus invocation of “humors” as a cover for vice in English society is exposed and castigated in the Induction to Every Man Out of his Humor by Asper, the on-stage character of the “poet,” when he laments the “abuse” of the word “humour” by contemporary Elizabethans. After explaining physiological humors theory and its metaphorical application in describing one’s “generall disposition,” Asper rails against the idea of “a humour” being used to justify all sorts of affectation and foolish or vicious behavior (104, 109). He complains,

But that a rooke, in wearing a pyed feather,

The cable hat-band, or the three-pild ruffe,

A yard of shooetye, or the Switzers knot

On his French garters, should affect a Humour!

O, ‘tis more then most ridiculous. (110-114)

Thus, the “humors” in Jonsonian comedy typically stand for various sorts of affectation, social posing, and the like. On the whole, in fact, Jonson’s comedy is very concerned with matters of social class and behavior. More explicitly so, probably, than much of prior Elizabethan comedy. Barber describes these concerns as typical of satirical comedy, particularly in contrast with the type of festive comedy created by Shakespeare and other comic practitioners like him. “Satirical comedy,” Barber argues, “tends to deal with relations between social classes and aberrations in movements between them. Saturnalian comedy is satiric only incidentally; its clarification comes with movement between poles of restraint and release in everybody’s experience” (8). The satiric
commentary on “relations between social class and aberrations in movements between them,” as will be shown below, is particularly timely to contemporary English society in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when Jonson was writing.

Jonson’s development of the comic genre in humors comedy, which stresses the exposure and ridicule of common vices as its central purpose, is in accord with ideas of comedy as they are expressed in late sixteenth century literary criticism, such as Philip Sidney’s *Apologie for Poesie*, George Puttenham’s *The Arte of English Poesie*, Thomas Lodge’s *Defence of Poetry*, and his own *Discoveries*. Sidney, for example, defines the genre as follows: “Comedy is an imitation of the common errors of our life, which [the comic poet] representeth, in the most ridiculous and scornefull sort that may be. So as it is impossible, that any beholder can be content to be such a one” (176-77). Jonson echoes Sidney’s arguments that comedy imitates “the common errors of life” in the *Discoveries* when he specifically catalogs the specific vices that can be found in a typical comic scene: “There shall the Spectator see some, insulting with Joy; others, fretting with Melancholy; raging with Anger; mad with Love; boiling with Avarice; undone with Riot; tortur’d with expectation; consum’d with feare; no perturbation in common life, but the [spectator] finds example of it in the [comic] Scene” (2537-43). The neoclassical concept of comedy espoused by Sidney, Jonson, Puttenham, et. al. sees comedy as a staging of foolish, or “erroneous” behavior for the purposes of ridicule, with the intended moral effect that viewers would “scorne” to imitate those staged behaviors in real life.

Though some modern scholars of Roman comedy – Segal for instance⁶ – argue that such a moral emphasis on the satiric is foreign to the festive spirit of classical New Comedy, according to many sixteenth century readings of ancient comedy, the comic
emphasis on the satiric rather than the festive is consonant with Roman models. Roman comedies, with their intrigue plots and stock characters being duped by a wily slave and his young master, are read as exemplary in their moral instruction. The duping of the agelasts is seen to expose their excessive greed; the wily scheming of a slave reveals his lack of ethics; the romance plot exposes the untamed lust of youth, and so on.

Thomas Lodge’s *Defence of Poetry* demonstrates the moral reading of ancient comedy in his analysis of Terence’s use of character types in the service of moral reproof:

A poet’s wit can correct, yet not offend. . . . Terence wyl not report the abuse of harlots vnder the proper stile, but he can finely girde them vnder the person of Thais. Hee dare not openly tell the Rich of theyr couetousnesse and seuerity towards their children, but he can controle them vnder the person of Durus Demeas. He must not shew the abuse of noble yong gentilmen vnder theyr owne title, but he wyll warne them in the person of Pamphilus. Wil you learne to knowe a parasite? Looke vpon his Dauus. Wyl you seke the abuse of courtly flatterers? Behold Gnato. (82)

Lodge’s reading of New Comic plots as revealing the vices of stock characters – however indirectly they may do so – is typical of the moralizing conceptions of the genre in Renaissance neoclassical comic theory, as noted in Sidney and Jonson above. Typical “abuses” like “couetousnesse,” wantonness, and flattery are exposed and implicitly “corrected” through their comic representation in the persons of Demeas, Pamphilus, and Gnato.
The prefatory matter to Jonson’s early plays, such as the scathing satire of “humors” in the Induction to *Every Man Out of his Humor*, announces in no uncertain terms that the exposure and ridicule of vice is the informing principle behind his comic practice. In the Prologue to the folio version of *Every Man in his Humor*, for instance, Jonson states that his comedy will show

\[
\ldots \text{deedes, and language, such as men doe use:}
\]

\[
\text{And persons, such as Comœdie would chuse,}
\]

\[
\text{When she would shew an Image of the times,}
\]

\[
\text{And sport with humane follies, not with crimes. (21-26)}
\]

Another of the key elements of the moral satire in Jonson’s conception of the comic genre is also articulated in this Prologue. Jonson insists that the representation of characters and plots not only carry a clear moral message by ridiculing the characters’ “follies” but that the representation of these “follies” be contemporary. His comedy will, indeed, “sport with humane follies,” representing them, “in the most ridiculous and scornfull sort that may be” (Sidney 176-77). However, the follies represented must also present an “Image of the times,” Elizabethan times, not Roman.

In his early comedies, Jonson thus shifts the focus from the triumph of youth and the renewal of society themes that characterize much of classical New Comedy to the exposure and ridicule of contemporary social follies in an English culture that is characterized by unprecedented social mobility and a commercialized patronage system that, as the plays argue, tends to give favor and advancement to those who can purchase it rather than those whose individual abilities earn it. The dramaturgical adaptation of the classical comic model to the purposes of particularly contemporary social satire is noted

by its greater flexibility, contributed to this freer handling, by releasing the poet from the traditional categories of comic types. It provided a bridge between classical theory and modern life, and helped to render it possible for the master of satiric comedy, the doughty champion of classicism, and the most powerful of Elizabethan realists, to be united in the same man. In addition, by throwing the dramatic emphasis on character at the cost of incident, it threw into the background, once for all, the comedy of mere intrigue. (1.343).

It is useful here to note again that a centrally important element in Jonson’s adaptation of the classical comic model to the satiric humors comedy is his revision of the clever slave character type, the character Segal identifies as “the essence of the comic spirit” (110). Though, as we have seen, Segal asserts the slave character’s importance due to his singularly “festive” subversive qualities, his subversive qualities are read by many of Jonson’s contemporaries as having a satiric effect as well. The intrigue plots devised by clever slaves in classical comedy are read by critics like Sidney and Lodge as deriding the greed, envy, miserliness, and stupidity of the agelast characters who are the victims of their schemes and intriguing. In Terence’s Adelphoe, for example, as Lodge reads it, Demeas’s moral flaws of “croupetousness and seuerity” are thrown into sharper relief by the plotting of Syrus, who schemes to keep the old blocking character from interfering with the romances of the youths Aeschinus and Ctesipho. Demeas’s greed
would be far less visible if it weren’t brought into conflict with Syrus’s plots to separate him from his money. Thus, as it is the intrigue plot of Roman comedy that generates the conflicts and catastrophes which give opportunity for the comic exposure of the vices, and as the plotting of the slave is the source of many intrigue plots, the slave character could still be said to be the “essence of the comic spirit,” even if that spirit is defined as satiric rather than festive.7

In any case, it is the satiric spirit of the servant that receives the emphasis in Jonsonian comedy. Jonson’s comedies depend for much of their satiric exposure on subversive servant character types, who, much like their literary predecessor, the clever slave of classical comedy, engage in elaborate schemes and irreverent commentary that dupes, and thus exposes and ridicules, other characters in the play who are representative of typical social vices. In analyzing the importance of the slave character to classical comedy, Dana Sutton notes that the social position of the slave is integral to his satiric role. Sutton argues, “‘Unacceptable’ behavior, speech, and feelings can be given freer expression by slave-characters towards whom the spectator can hold an attitude of superiority” (103). Jonson’s servant characters are similarly uniquely suited to their satiric role by the social class from which he draws them. In the case of Jonson’s servants, however, the quality identified with the social type that suits particularly suits them for their role is not inferiority, so much as it is an unsettled and subversive mobility.

As this chapter shows in more detail below, the servant and apprentice classes in Jonson’s England possessed an unprecedented physical and vocational mobility which was perceived with a measure of anxiety by their superiors in the social hierarchy. Jonson exploits this mobile quality and plays upon the anxiety by depicting his servant
characters as moving fluidly between different levels and groups within society and by having them dupe and deride as they go. Their instability is portrayed as a danger to the “established” social gentility both because their kinetic nature enables the execution of their intrigue plots, which end in exposing the unworthiness or outright fraud of the plays’ “gentlemen,” and because their instability in socially mobile Elizabethan England mirrors the real instability of the entire social hierarchy at the time, and thus gives the lie to the permanence and reverence that the English gentility wished to have attached to their rank and honor.

The way that Jonson draws his servant characters within their societal contexts in his comedies, thus, exploits the servant character’s unsettled social status as a reflection of the unstable position of the parvenu gentility that have recently risen to power, wealth or other prominence as a result of the new social mobility in late Elizabethan England. The changes that Jonson makes to the clever slave character type, of course, include those that would have to accompany differences in dramatically representing servants and apprentices as opposed to slaves, but the nature of these changes goes beyond the obvious changes that would be demanded by literary decorum. As noted above, the dramatic emphasis in Jonson’s comedies is shifted to a satiric characterization of contemporary social types who are defined by their humors, i.e. their particularly besetting follies or vices. These characteristic follies are most commonly part and parcel of the characters’ either holding or pretending to hold a position on the social scale higher than what their real abilities or pedigrees merit. These positions are most often gained either by wealth – i.e. they are purchased – or by fraud – i.e. the characters affect a station that they do not actually possess.
Jonson’s comedies argue that the number of persons who are out of place in Elizabethan society is an unfortunate result of the unprecedented social mobility and commercialization of the patronage system in late Elizabethan England. In the service of making this argument, Jonson employs characters drawn from servant and apprentice or equivalent classes, who possess a social mobility of their own, to present a skewed mirror of the social mobility of the newly moneyed classes. In so doing, Jonson exploits contemporary anxieties surrounding the servant classes to provide a satiric foil for the higher class gulls of the plays. The unsettled nature of the servant characters with regard to place both enables their satiric commentary upon, and provides a satiric reflection of, the displacement that results from commercialized social mobility in late Elizabethan England. Thus, Jonson’s development of the potentialities for satire inherent in the servant character in his early comedies depends as much on the identification of the character with a contemporary social type as it does upon the literary inheritance of the character from the wily clever slave of Jonson’s Roman predecessors.

II

The London that is the setting for the folio version of Every Man in his Humor and Every Man Out of his Humor is filled with people who either occupy a higher rank in society than their merit deserves or who are affecting to hold social positions that they in fact do not. Undoubtedly, the gap between outwardly expressed social rank and the actual merit of particular characters is exaggerated in these comedies for dramatic purposes, but historians of the late Elizabethan period indicate that this disparity between actual social rank and personal merit in the hierarchy that Jonson dramatizes has some basis in historical fact.
The historical context for Jonson’s satire of parvenu gulls and courtly poseurs is the unprecedented social mobility that occurred in the latter half of Elizabeth’s reign, which saw an historic increase in the numbers of gentry in England. Lawrence Stone’s *The Crisis of the Aristocracy* documents the sharp rise in grants of arms to new gentlemen between 1580 and 1600 (39). The economic causes for the rise in the number of new gentry during this time were various. Historian Alan G. R. Smith observes that the rise in agricultural prices in the latter sixteenth century made many yeomen farmers prosperous. These yeomen were often then able, because of their prosperity, to purchase titles of gentility for themselves (169). Moreover, land, the primary requirement for gentility, was also available for purchase for those who had been newly made prosperous by agriculture and/or trade, because the aristocracy who had possessed it often needed to sell it off in order to settle debts. As Stone notes, the landed aristocrats in England often accumulated substantial debt, due to their liberal spending on luxuries and absentee living at court (26). Such expensive living was expected of the aristocratic elite; Stone observes, “The prime test of rank was liberality . . . It involved wearing rich clothes, living in a substantial well-furnished house, keeping plenty of servants, and above all maintaining a lavish table to which anyone of the right social standing was welcome” (26). A lifestyle of such lavish expenditure, combined with rising prices and relatively low incomes from low copy- or freehold rental agreements, meant that many landed aristocrats were forced to settle their debts by selling off demesne lands. The buyers for these lands were often the newly wealthy yeomen or merchants who were eager to join the ranks of the landed gentry.
Thus, the ranks of the gentry were “infiltrated” in the late sixteenth century by merchants and yeoman with newly acquired purchasing power. The sale of titles and even offices was further advanced in the 1590s by the crown’s need for money to conduct the war with Spain. Linda Levy Peck’s *Court Patronage and Corruption in Early Stuart England* details the beginnings of the commercialization of the royal patronage system late in Elizabeth’s reign and the blurring of traditional social class boundaries that resulted from it (31-34). This confusion of class identity – the inability to distinguish between the peerage, the gentility, and the wealthy yeomen and citizens – was seen as a problematic aspect, to say the least, of the new social mobility and the economic changes that enabled it. In an atmosphere wherein so many former commoners were rising to the gentility, it became difficult to keep tabs on which persons were really gentlemen and which were simply posing as such, for the influx of capital in the period and the increase in the moneyed populace, as well as the increase in the availability of credit, meant that a gentleman’s expensive lifestyle of excess and consumption could be imitated. A rich merchant or yeoman could dress, entertain, and generally spend like a gentleman, and since “expenditure” was “the acid test for determining rank,” he might be taken for one if he could indeed afford to act the part (Stone 26). Literally, one could be a counterfeit gentleman, as are many of the gulls in Jonson’s humors comedies. Stone details the cycle of “conspicuous consumption” by the elite, the imitation of it by slightly lower classes, and the resultant confusion in identifying particular persons as members of a specific rank in the late sixteenth century as follows:

A self-perpetuating cycle was thus set up. Over-consumption led to sale of land, which generated social mobility and psychological insecurity.
among the purchasers; in its turn insecurity caused a struggle for status, exacerbated by the inflation of honours, which found expression in competitive consumption. (86)

This kind of confusion in distinguishing who was of what social class was naturally an anathema to a culture that had been used to ordering itself according to a well defined social hierarchy in which assignation of rank was based upon bloodlines rather than bank accounts. William Harrison’s detailed contemporary account “Of Degrees of People in the Commonwealth of England” in *The Description of England*, first published in 1577, shows the interest of Elizabethans in the hierarchical ordering of their populace:

We in England divide our people commonly into four sorts, as gentlemen, citizens or burgesses, yeomen, and artificers or laborers. Of gentlemen the first and chief (next the King) be the prince, dukes, marquises, earls, viscounts, and barons, and these are called gentlemen of the greater sort, or (as our common usage of speech is) lords and noblemen; and next unto them be knights, esquires, and, last of all, they that are simply called gentlemen; so that in effect our gentlemen are divided into their conditions, whereof in this chapter I will make particular rehearsal. (94)

Conservative elements of Elizabethan society, including the Tudor and Stuart governments, in general, opposed the changes that a growing gentleman class posed to the status quo that Harrison describes. Smith writes of the governmental reaction to changing social conditions, “Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century governments no doubt welcomed, in general terms, the growth of an avowedly respectable element among the
‘middling’ ranks of the population. Their general policy towards social change was, however, to prevent it” (185). Stone describes the prevailing conservative attitude regarding the ideal social order espoused by the Elizabethan government as follows:

As the universe was ordered in a great chain of being, so the nation was regulated by obedience to a hierarchy of superiors leading up to the King, so society was composed of various estates of men all settled and content in their degree, and so the family was ordered by subservience of wife and children to the pater familias . . . . Given these assumptions, it was natural that the supreme virtues should be obedience and the avoidance of change. (15)

However, the social conservatism that Stone identifies as the ideal was becoming less sustainable in the economic climate of late sixteenth century England. The rigid and traditional division of an Elizabethan “two-class society of those who were gentlemen and those who were not” became an insufficient description of the actual social makeup (Stone 26). As Stone puts it, “By the end of the sixteenth century this naïve view did not even begin to fit the facts” (27).

The changes in the social hierarchy due to changing economic conditions were exacerbated by the corruption of Elizabeth’s patronage system as an indirect result of the war with Spain. Smith explains that as the costs of the war forced Elizabeth to “restrain her bountiful hand from rewarding her servants,” she was forced to reward her courtiers with perquisites like patents of monopoly in lieu of monetary gifts or other honors (238). The paucity of rewards led to an increase in competition to obtain them, resulting in corrupt dealings between those who distributed rewards and those who sought them. As
Smith describes it, “there was an increasingly ferocious struggle for those [rewards] that remained, with clients offering larger and larger gratuities, which soon become indistinguishable from outright bribes, to courtiers and middlemen who might further suits” (238). The corruption of patronage led to a situation wherein perquisites were essentially sold, rather than granted as awards for civic or military merit. As Peck describes the situation, a combination of the rise in purchasing power of many of the lower gentry and merchants, the need of aristocrats and the crown for money, and the latent medieval system of gift-giving as a staple of the patronage system led to the commercialization of patronage whereby well placed gifts – or bribes – secured rewards for those who could afford to purchase them (16-17).

What is more, as Smith points out, in the latter half of the 1590s, the corruption of public service “was given added significance by the breakdown of the classic Elizabethan patronage system” (238). The catalyst for this breakdown in these years, Smith argues, was the attempt by the Earl of Essex to “achieve a monopoly of power” over Elizabethan patronage (238). Though Essex’s power play was ultimately unsuccessful and he was executed for his ambitions, his effect on the patronage system in the last years of Elizabeth’s reign was still greatly felt. Smith argues, “The patronage system which had served [Elizabeth] so well for most of her reign became a destabilizing influence in the State during the last years of her life” (239). Stone draws attention to a specific instance of Essex’s destabilizing influence when he notes that the earl created eighty-one new knights “against the express orders of the Queen” in 1599 (40). “The consequences of his action,” Stone goes on to say, “coupled with the extreme parsimony of the Queen, was to create the curious situation whereby numbers of young gentlemen were swaggering about
London as knights, while their fathers in their country manor-houses were obliged to content themselves with the humbler title of esquire”(40-41). This late destabilization and corruption of patronage in Elizabethan England contributed greatly to an unprecedentedly unstable and mobile social structure in which money very often was the means for advancement up the scale of rank. Moreover, it should not be forgotten that if Elizabeth granted almost no new peerages, as Stone notes, there was sharp increase in the grants of arms of gentility in the last twenty years of Elizabeth’s reign, and these arms could be, in essence, purchased (39).

The changes to the map of the social hierarchy described above were decried from various quarters. Smith quotes from contemporary sermons to show how the church and state sought to slow the phenomenon of social mobility by tying place in society to place in God’s providential design:

> Every degree of people in their vocation, calling and office hath appointed to them their duty and order: some are in high degree, some in low, some kings and princes, some inferiors and subjects, priests and laymen, masters and servants, fathers and children, husbands and wives, rich and poor: and everyone hath need of other: so that in all things is to be lauded and praised the goodly order of God. (qtd in Smith 186)

As the above sermon shows, the phenomenon of the *nouveaux riche* was often seen as a sign of the moral degeneration of society in that it accorded ill with the providential ordering of society by God. In addition to the “immorality” of blurring social map, the air of “honor” that had been attached to the rank of gentility was lost to a great degree. Sir Thomas Smith, in his 1583 *De Republica Anglorum*, gives a rather jaded definition of
a “gentleman” that attributes the rank more to the financial ability to maintain a lifestyle than it does any honorable pedigree. Sir Thomas says that “to be short, who can live idly and without manual labour and will bear the port, charge and countenance of a gentleman, he shall be called master, for that is the title which men give to esquires and other gentlemen, and shall be taken for a gentleman” (39-40).

Moreover, the commercialization of perquisites, such as monopolies, that accompanied the social mobility of late sixteenth century England were complained against by those who felt themselves oppressed by the closed markets and high prices that resulted. In 1601, parliament forced Elizabeth to withdraw several of the monopolies that she had granted in the 1590s, testifying to the negative attitudes taken by many Elizabethans towards those who had recently advanced up the social ladder as a result of “corrupt” patronage (Peck 33). The extent to which the changing social structure corresponded with a rise in court corruption undoubtedly contributed to negative perceptions of the new gentility like the one articulated by Sir Thomas Smith.

The upward mobility of yeomen and merchants, though, was not the only social movement that stirred anxiety among conservative Elizabethan culture. The movement of the vagrant poor and servant/apprentice classes was also a cause for concern. The mobility of the lower classes was not movement up or down the social ladder, however, but a physical and vocational mobility from place to place and from job to job. Itinerancy, as Patricia Fumerton notes in *Unsettled: The Culture of Mobility and the Working Poor in Early Modern England*, was often a necessity for the poor in order to survive in light of the rising food prices in the last decades of the sixteenth century. She writes that “the poor, even poor householders, increasingly found themselves living in an
unstable state of subsistence poverty in which they had to hustle in multiple, shifting by-
employsments to just get by – a kind of placed mobility” (12). Elizabethan authorities saw
this itinerancy among the poor as subversive and threatening, and attempts were made
legally to control it, to contain the working and the vagrant poor within a “proper” locale
and vocation. Fumerton documents prosecutions of various laboring poor for not finding
“stable” service or apprenticeship (15-16). Remarking on these prosecutions, she says,

What is so intriguing about such prosecutions . . . is that in the minds of
contemporary authorities, the vagrant experience did not need to involve
physical mobility or even homelessness. It was marked by being out of
place, which included engagement in irregular or unsettled labor. (16)

There is a sense in which the unsettled, “out-of-place” nature of the laboring and vagrant
poor mirrored the instability and equally out-of-place nature of the lower and middling
gentry of the period, especially those who had just come to the rank. Just as the unsettled
poor occupied a tenuous position in society, susceptible to such economic factors as
changes in food prices, so the middling gentry – and their immediate inferiors, rich
merchants and yeomen – were susceptible to the caprices of the market and the patronage
system. Much as the herald might try to color a new claim to gentility as based on
ancient right, the reality is that many of the titles granted at this time were based only
upon sufficient wealth, and the importance of the title could disappear with the wealth
that purchased it depending on shifts in markets.

In any event, neither mobile social group gave evidence of being contented in
their place, and as such, both were threatening to a conservative ideal of a stable social
order. The new gentry, of course, would not like to view themselves as subversive. On
the contrary, they preferred to think of themselves as members of the old guard just as soon as they had their arms. The mobility of the laboring poor though was a reminder that the same economic phenomenon that had caused unprecedented vagrancy of the poor also gave birth to their gentility. Both were out-of-place as a result of changing economic conditions, and Jonson’s use of the servant figure capitalizes on this socially reflective relationship between the itinerant lower class and the new gentry.

As William Carroll observes in “‘The Nursery of Beggary’: Enclosure, Vagrancy, and Sedition in the Tudor-Stuart Period,” another reason why the unsettled poor were viewed as subversive is that they were viewed by many English government officials as a likely drain on a local economy, possibly as thieves, and in the worst case, as a food riot waiting to happen. According to Carroll, many saw the vagrant poor problem in late Elizabethan England as “an uncontrollable, chaotic energy threatening the entire social order of both country and city” (36). Fumerton observes that the same sentiments were largely true of servant and apprentice classes as well, largely because their lack of financial security in a time of rising prices and a surplus labor force made them constant candidates to join the ranks of the vagrant poor. She argues, “From the perspective of authority in a patriarchal and theoretically static society, the laboring poor who moved from job to job and place to place were tremendously threatening and subversive” (4). The laboring and vagrant poor were threatening to the social order because they were visible reminders of its instability in a time of unprecedented social mobility. Mendicant vagrants who may riot if hungry enough and itinerant servants who moved from job to job were emblems that the conception of society as composed of settled estates and degrees was not a reality in late Elizabethan England.
Again, the preference among the conservative English populace at the time seemed to be for a clearly ordered social hierarchy, with each rung on the ladder well defined by visible components, as is illustrated by the delineation of the English social order in Harrison’s *The Description of England*. Such clarity in identifying where one fit in the social order was blurring in late Elizabethan England, however, despite the best attempts by social conservatives to solidify the class stratification by legislative measures like sumptuary laws. Attempts by authorities to control both the physical mobility of the poor classes and the social mobility of the new money were largely unsuccessful.

Jonson’s early comedies critique this muddied social order as fostering the creation of many inequities between social rank and personal merit. Perhaps more damning is the charge that the confused apparatus for determining social identity created opportunities for many counterfeits to insinuate themselves into the favor of patronage and credit by out and out fraud. The *dramatis personae* of Jonson’s early comedies are a roster of typical gulls – many of them newly or unworthily prosperous – in late Elizabethan England. In the satiric characterization of these types, the folly of almost every one of them is tied to their occupying of – or pretending to occupy – a place they are unworthy of within the social hierarchy. The comedies feature fraudulent courtiers, such as *Every Man Out of his Humor*’s Fastidious Briske and Fungoso, who drive themselves deep into debt in order to keep up a courtly guise that is utterly beyond either their financial or intellectual capacities to maintain; new-moneyed country gulls who make asses of themselves when they attempt to parlay their financial wherewithal into a place among the urban gentry, such as Stephen in *Every Man in his Humor* and Sogliardo in *Every Man Out of his Humor*; plagiarizing poets; greedy yeoman farmers; fraudulent
mendicant soldiers; and the list goes on. All of Jonson’s gulls, though, share the trait of affecting to a higher social rank than they can or should hold, and their affectation is in large part enabled by the context of Elizabethan social mobility.

Jonson’s early comedies dramatically represent a Theophrastian menagerie of characters who embody the worst of the frauds and inequities that were results of the unsettled social order of late Elizabethan England. The targets of the satire in Jonson’s comedies most often either occupy, or feign to occupy, social places of at least middling gentility; that is, they hold or pretend to hold positions of wealth, power, or courtly prestige. As a means of revealing their fraudulent personas – and by extension the corruption of the entire social order – Jonson employs as guides and expositors character types from the equally mobile lower social orders.

The servant character type, as I have argued above, is doubly qualified to do the satiric work of exposure in Jonson’s plays. On one hand, as a dramatic device, the character’s similarity to the wily slave of Roman comedy provides a classical literary precedent for his scheming and satiric commentary, both of which expose and ridicule. On the other hand, the contemporary conception of the lower class servant type provides Jonson with a recognizably subversive character, whose shifting, unsettled nature mirrors the latent instability of the upper classes as well. Moreover, the itinerant mobility associated with the servant class allows for a character drawn from it to move fluidly from group to group within the plot of the play, using disguise, flattery, and extortion to execute his deceptive plots that reveal the frauds of the affecting humors characters.

The means of satiric exposure this character type allows for can be clearly seen in the early plays, Every Man in his Humor and Every Man Out of his Humor. In the first
play, Brainworm (Musco in the 1604 quarto version), a clear descendant of the Plautine clever slave, moves through the Anglicized New Comic plot duping his old master and aiding his young one. In the characterization of Brainworm, though, Jonson capitalizes on the satiric potential of the scheming of the servant type, moving him rapidly through the comic intrigue plot, duping and exposing his satiric victims, throwing the comic emphasis on their follies and pretensions, which are what makes them susceptible to duping in the first place. In Every Man Out of his Humor, Jonson’s servant characters are less recognizable as descendants of clever slaves, but more satirically threatening as dramatizations of contemporary social types disaffected by the patronage circle. Carlo Buffone, the tavern railer, and Macilente, the scholar who has been denied advancement, throw themselves wholly into exposing the pretense and folly of a social hierarchy that gives preferment to the unworthy. In each of these cases, Jonson capitalizes on the satiric potential of the character type, both in its literary inheritance and in its resonance with a recognizably subversive social persona.

III

Near the middle of the second act in Every Man in his Humor, Brainworm, whom Justice Clement later credits with engineering the bulk of the play’s intrigue, enters and delivers a soliloquy that indelibly identifies his character with both his literary predecessor, the clever slave, and the London social type which he represents, the unsettled servant class. Entering Moorfields disguised as a mendicant soldier, Brainworm delivers to the audience the scheme he has in mind to dupe his old master, Edward Knowell Sr.:
S’lid, I cannot choose but laugh, to see my selfe translated thus, from a
poore creature to a creator; for now must I create an intolerable sort of
lyes, or my present profession looses the grace: and yet the lye to a man
of my coat, is as ominous a fruit, as the Fico. O sir, it holds for good
politie euer, to haue that outwardly in vilest estimation, that inwardly is
most deare to vs. So much, for my borrowed shape. Well, the troth is, my
old master intends to follow my yong, drie foot, ouer More-fields, to
London, this morning: now I, knowing, of this hunting-match, or rather
conspiracie, and to insinuate with my yong master (for so must we that
are blew-waiters, and men of hope and seruice doe, or perhaps wee may
weare motley at the yeeres end, and who weares motley, you know) haue
got me afore, in this disguise, determining here to lye in ambuscado, and
intercept him, in the mid-way. If I can but get his cloke, his purse, his hat,
nay, any thing, to cut him off, that is, to stay his journey, Veni, vidi, vici, I
may say with Captayne CAESAR, I am made for euer, ifaith. Well, now I
must practice to get the true garb of one of these Lance-knights. . . .

(2.4.1-23)

Brainworm’s divulging of his deceptive scheme to the audience signals to a
literate audience – ever the audience Jonson claims to address – his descent from the
Roman clever slave. Plautine slaves consistently let the audience in on their
machinations through soliloquy, just as Brainworm does here. Moreover, the plot that
Brainworm announces, one based on “an intolerable sort of lyes” is typical of the
deceptive plotting of a Plautine slave (2.4.3). Given that the schemes of the clever slaves,
which play upon the greed and stupidity of the agelast characters in a typical Roman plot, are central to the satirically comic plot of Roman comedy in sixteenth century conceptions of the genre as one that exposes and ridicules common errors, the identification of Brainworm with the clever slave type, here, gives evidence of his centrality to the satiric plot of this play. At the same time, given the rascally character of the Roman slave, this identification colors him as a character that is inherently subversive and dangerous.

In this soliloquy, Brainworm identifies himself with more than just the clever slave who is his literary predecessor, though. He also identifies himself as a typical sixteenth century English serving man, when he names his membership among the liveried: “[W]e that are blew-waiters, and men of hope and service” (2.4.12-13). Serving men in England in the late sixteenth century were considered by many to be as threatening and subversive as the depictions of clever slaves in Roman comedy. Harrison, for example, says of serving men, “These men are profitable to none, for if their condition be well perused, they are enemies to their masters, to their friends, and to themselves” (119). He goes on to note the stereotype that poor servants were likely to pad their income by thieving, describing them as “men that, having not wherewith of their own to maintain their excesses, do search in highways, budgets, coffers, mails, and stables which way to supply their wants” (119). Moreover, Harrison describes servants as parasitic, mercenary, and wasteful, liable to “insinuate themselves with young gentlemen and noblemen newly come to their lands . . . whereby the good natures of the parties are not only a little impaired but also their livelihoods and revenues so wasted and consumed that if at all, yet not in many years, they shall be able to recover themselves”
Harrison’s description, at first glance, seems apropos to Brainworm. Though his young master, Ed Knowell Jr., has not come into his lands yet, the parasitism that Harrison describes seems to be exactly Brainworm’s stated plan: to “insinuate [himself] with [his] yong master” (2.4.11).

The picture of the typical serving man that Harrison draws and that Brainworm seems to embody displays the unsettled character that Fumerton observes in her study of the servant class in this period. It is precisely this unsettled, mobile – even mercenary – characteristic of the servant class that makes it threatening. The anxiety about servant mobility that Fumerton documents in the legal measures taken throughout the sixteenth century to control the physical and vocational mobility of servants can also be seen in moralizing homiletic literature of the period, such as John Fit John’s *A Diamond Most Precious, Worthy to be Marked*. Fit John’s 1577 treatise, which instructs “all Mysters and Servauntes, how they ought to leade their lyves,” stresses the loyalty that servants owe their masters, implicitly assuming they will go astray if not instructed (A1). Fit John cites biblical authority in support of his assertion of a servant’s moral duty, such as Romans 13: “Let euery soule submit himselfe vnto [the] authority of the higher powers. For there is no power but of God” (A2.verso). Both the legal and the sermonic literature of the day display a collective anxiety about the subversive potential of a mobile servant class. Harrison reflects this anxiety in his implication that serving men will leave one master for another if it is to their financial advantage.

Servants, however, were not the only ones guilty of mercenary tactics in master-servant relations in Elizabethan England. Masters were liable to let servants go when their usefulness was past, leaving the servants without means of provision. Harrison
acknowledges this of servants before describing them as unprofitable. “[T]here runneth a proverb ‘Young servingmen, old beggars,’” he writes, “because service is none heritage” (119). Fit John’s dialogue quotes the same proverb and adds a reference to Aesop’s fable of the greyhound, who is retained as long as he is young and useful, but when old, he is “set at liberty without comforte” (B2.verso). Brainworm’s soliloquy indicates that he is providing for this possibility by beating his master to the punch. In insinuating himself to his young master, he is securing his future employment: “for so must we that are blew-waiters, and men of hope and service doe, or perhaps wee may weare motley at the yeeres end” (2.4.12-14).

In light of the comic outcome of the play, it might also be argued that Brainworm’s motives are not even so self-centered as to be focused on retaining employment by gaining the favor of the young master in the ascendant. In duping his old master, Brainworm actually helps Edward Jr. to a fortunate marriage – Bridget comes with a portion of 3000 pounds (5.3.93). Knowell Sr. is mistaken in his assumption that his son is involved in immoral dissipation, and, therefore, in hoodwinking old Knowell and keeping him out of the way of the romance plot, Brainworm actually is doing right by him. The moral error, insofar as there is one here, lies in Knowell’s misrecognition. In “Faithful Servants: Shakespeare’s Praise of Disobedience,” Richard Strier surveys a strain of contemporary Protestant thought that stresses the duty of disobedience on the part of a good servant to an immoral master (108). Strier locates the disobedience of Kent in King Lear within this context and highlights in Shakespeare’s work a “distinction between virtuous disobedience and improper loyalty” (111). Parallels could be drawn
between the “virtuous disobedience” that Shakespearean servants like Kent and the fool in Lear display and the subversive loyalty that Brainworm shows in this play.

The contemporary contexts that Strier draws attention to, including the Protestant tradition he cites and the train of Shakespeare’s virtuously disobedient characters, only highlight the satirically expository potential of the servant character. Kent’s disobedience emphasizes Lear’s folly; Brainworm’s disobedience highlights Knowell’s overestimation of his obviously flawed moral discernment. What Jonson adds to the subversive servant in his handling of Brainworm and Knowell is an element of ridicule. Brainworm is not nearly as concerned with the reputation of his master as is Kent. The more old Knowell is humiliated for his overbearing, mistakenly moralizing humor, the better. This treatment is, of course, consistent with Jonson’s neoclassical concept of comedy as “sporting” with errors. The chief means, in fact, by which Jonson exposes and ridicules the humorous errors of other characters in Every Man in his Humor is by the subversive scheming and dialogue of the servant character, Brainworm. Through their interactions with Brainworm, the humors of the other characters are revealed, like Knowell’s, to be ridiculously misplaced, foolish, fraudulently affected, or some combination of these.

One of the characters who is most frequently the butt of Brainworm’s witty satire is Stephen, the nephew of his master who affects the position of a young gentleman gallant, socially in the ascendant. However, he consistently, yet unwittingly, exposes himself as lacking any meritorious means or wherewithal to be a respectable gentleman. For Stephen, the sum of gentility is maintaining the appearance of a gentleman. Seeking to bone up on what he considers gentlemanly behavior, he appears at his uncle’s in the play’s opening scene inquiring whether his cousin, Ed Knowell Jr., might have “a booke
on the sciences of hawking, and hunting” that he can borrow (1.1.32). Stephen, recognizing hawking and hunting as gentlemanly sports, assumes that if he can learn to discourse in them, then he will be taken for a gentleman. He professes his conception of gentility to his uncle as appearance, saying, “Slid a gentleman mun show himselfe like a gentleman” (1.1.50-51). His uncle responds by calling him “a prodigall absurd cocks-combe” and attempts to correct him by telling him that gentility does not consist in external appearances but rather of what one is and does (1.1.54). He gives Stephen a lengthy exhortation on the relative worthlessness of the title of gentleman:

I’ld ha’ you sober, and conteine your selfe;

Not, that your sayle be bigger then your boate:

But moderate your expense now (at first)

As you may keepe the same proportion still.

Nor stand so much on your gentilitie,

Which is an aerie, and meere borrowed thing,

From dead mens dust, and bones: and none of yours

Except you make, or hold it. (1.1.82-89)

Knowell’s instruction is wasted, though, on Stephen, who is consistently too foolish to learn from either advice or experience – so much so that Wellbred later calls him “stupiditie it selfe” (3.5.6-7). In the very next scene, when a messenger arrives, Stephen immediately attempts to assimilate his uncle’s instruction into his profession of gentlemanly status, and demonstrates that he exactly fails to get Knowell’s point in a speech that also reveals his scant hopes of ever really possessing financial means to be a
gentleman. When the messenger greets them with, “Saue you gentlemen,” Stephen responds,

Nay, we do’ not stand much on our gentilitie, friend; yet, you are welcome, and I assure you, mine uncle here is a man of a thousand a yeare, Middlesex land: hee has but one sonne in all the world, I am his next heire (at the common law) master STEPHEN, as simple as I stand here, if my cossen die (as theire’s hope he will) I haue a prettie liuing o’ mine owne too, beside, hard-by here. (1.2.1-8).

Stephen reveals that he has completely misunderstood his uncle’s instruction by assimilating the idea that gentility is not an external quality into an empty profession of his gentility. In effect, he disavows his gentility in order to better appear to be a gentleman. For Stephen, the totality of being a gentleman continues to be its appearance, and he consistently – and incompetently – attempts to affect the posture of gentility by fraudulently mimicking what he takes to be its proper appearance. It is this fraudulent and incompetent pretension, presumably typical of many would-be gentlemen in London, that Brainworm exposes and ridicules in conversation with Stephen throughout the play.

In the third scene, for example, Stephen blusters to Ed Knowell Jr. and Brainworm that he wishes to settle a score with the aforementioned messenger, who has unintentionally humiliated him in conversation. “O, I ha’ such a minde to beat him – Where is he? canst thou tell?” he asks Brainworm (1.3.18-19). By the time Stephen poses the question, as he doubtless knows, the messenger has gone. Thus, he safely affects a “gentlemanly” bravado, asserting what he would do were the messenger still present. However, Brainworm calls his bluff, telling Stephen which way the messenger
has gone and refuting every one of his excuses for not pursuing him, thereby revealing
him to be, in truth, a coward:

BRAY. He [the messenger] is rid hence. He tooke horse, at the streete
dore.

STEP. And, I staid I’ the fields! horson scander-bag rogue! ô that I had
but a horse to fetch him backe againe.

BRAY. Why, you may ha’ my [master’s] gelding, to saue your longing
sir.

STEP. But, I ha’ no bootes, that’s the spight on’t.

BRAY. Why, a fine wispe of hay, rould hard, master STEPHEN. (1.3.24-32)

Brainworm’s responses, each of them ostensibly made in the spirit of a faithful servant
who is attempting to aid his superior, completely deflate Stephen’s affected bravery.
Finally realizing that he will gain no compliment from Brainworm for his gentlemanly
courage, Stephen attempts to puff himself up on account of another of his “gentlemanly”
qualities: his sartorial prowess. Changing the subject, he draws Brainworm’s attention to
his appearance: “How dost thou like my legge, BRAYNE-WORME?” (1.3.41)

Brainworm’s witty response exposes the baseless affectation of Stephen’s
posturing. He replies, “A very good leg! master STEPHEN! but the woollen stocking
do’s not commend it so well” (1.3.42–43). Again, Brainworm’s words are appropriate
for a servant; he even ostensibly praises Stephen’s leg, but he subtly reveals that Stephen
actually lacks even the appearance of gentility by virtue of the fact that his stockings are
woolen and not silk. Undaunted, Stephen professes that by winter he will have a pair of
silk stockings to equip him for his stay in the city and reasserts the quality of his leg.

Brainworm’s final lines contemptuously dismiss Stephen as an incorrigible gull: “You haue an excellent good legge, master STEPHEN, but I cannot stay, to praise it longer now, and I am very sorie for’t” (1.3.51-53). Of course, the contempt in the dismissal is lost on Stephen, who responds, “Another time wil serue, BRAYNE-WORME. Gramercie for this” (1.3.54-55).

The treatment that Brainworm gives Stephen in this scene, drawing out his cowardice, his lack of means, and his baseless vanity, is typical of the way that he, along with the young gallants Edward Knowell Jr. and Wellbred, expose the follies of the gulls who affect fraudulent postures in the play through their witty dialogue. As Brainworm, in particular, though, moves between groups of character in the play’s action, his role in the satiric exposure of the play’s gulls is not so much in his witty repartee as it is in his deceptive schemes that, like his clever slave predecessors, play upon the folly of the other characters. His kinetic and unsettled scheming mirrors the unstable nature of the gulls’ pretentious poses of gentility, even as the schemes themselves expose their affectation and fraud.

Brainworm’s schemes of deception in the play, the schemes by which the affected pretensions of the characters mired in their humors are exposed, are carried out primarily by the means of disguise, following the precedent of many clever slaves in Roman comedy. Brainworm first appears in disguise on Moorfields when he delivers the soliloquy cited above. The disguise he adopts here is that of a mendicant soldier. He tells the audience, “Well, now must I practice to get the garb of one of these Lance-knights” (2.4.20-21). The disguise itself comprises a satiric critique of one contemporary
London social type that Jonson depicts as taking advantage of the unsettled social scene in England in the 1590s: namely the *fraudulent* mendicant soldier, i.e. a vagrant who affects the pose of a discharged soldier in order to beg upon the charity of his fellow Englishmen.

Alan G. R. Smith notes the strain that discharged soldiers from the Spanish wars of the 1590s put on English society, particularly in the context of discussions concerning poor law reform. Smith points out that “the needs and misdeeds of discharged soldiers and sailors returning from the wars were important elements in the problems which the poor and vagrants posed for the government during the 1590s” (235). The discharged soldiers were a problem because, upon their return to England from service, they often found themselves without employment and turned to vagrancy and begging, if not thievery, in order to survive. William Carroll’s *Fat King, Lean Beggar* details the cyclical process by which the vagrancy problem was exacerbated by Elizabethan conscription practices. Carroll notes that England in the 1590s contained a relatively constant vagrant population of able bodied men who would “be rounded up to become soldiers and sent overseas to battle; those who survived and returned home as unemployed soldiers would be condemned as vagrants and rounded up again for further service” (62).

As noted above, there was already a concern among English authorities at this time about the rise in the number of civilian vagrants resulting from increased population and inflated food prices. The vagrant soldiery only added to the problem. Smith summarizes the government’s attempts to deal with the problem in the poor law statutes of 1598 as follows:
Discharged soldiers were seen as a special category among both the deserving and the vagrant poor[,] and separate acts of 1598 dealt with the problems which they posed (39 Eliz., cc. 21, 17). A special rate was to be levied in every parish for the relief of sick and maimed soldiers and mariners, but discharged soldiers and sailors who had taken to vagrancy were subjected to the most severe penalties. They were ordered to settle down to some lawful work and those who did not were to be executed. The ferocity of this provision, so much harsher than that against ordinary rogues, clearly indicated the extent of the problem which former soldiers and sailors were posing to law and order; the effects of war with Spain could be seen in the activities of discharged soldiers in the streets of London and in the counties of southern England as well as in the presence of English armies in the Netherlands and France. (235-36)

Old Knowell represents the harsh line taken by English authorities towards able-bodied discharged soldiers. When he meets the disguised Brainworm at Moorfields, the older man responds to his request for alms by asserting that the “soldier” is still physically capable and encouraging him to take some course of labor:

Why, were thy education ne’re so meane,
Hauing thy limbs, a thousand fairer courses
Offer themselues, to thy election.
Either the warres might still supply thy wants,
Or service of some virtuous gentleman,
Or honest labour: nay, what can I name,
But would become thee better then to beg? (2.5.99-105)

Moreover, Knowell excuses himself from giving on the grounds of the immorality of giving to the undeserving poor, a sentiment that Smith notes was very formative in shaping the 1598 statutes, which sought to delineate the deserving poor from the undeserving (235). Knowell tells Brainworm, still taking him to be a mendicant soldier,

Now, afore me, what e’re he be, that should
Relieue a person of thy qualitie,
While thou insist’s in this loose desperate course,
I would esteeme the sinne, not thine, but his. (2.5.110-113)

This hard line was not the only attitude taken towards discharged soldiers in late Elizabethan England, though, nor is it the only attitude represented in Jonson’s comedy. As cultural historian Jeffrey Singman explains, English society had ambivalent feelings towards the new vagrant soldier population. “They were widely glorified for their exploits and achievements,” Singman writes, “yet they were also mistrusted by the population at large, as they integrated poorly into the fabric of civilian life” (30). As much as discharged soldiers were viewed as a social nuisance, they were also lauded by many for their service in the wars, and doubtless, the nationalistic feeling that prevailed in England following the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 extended to an appreciation of the soldiery by many. Jonson’s epigram, “To Trve Sovliders” expresses an appreciation for the English soldiery. In that poem, he refers to soldiers as the “Strength of my Countrey” and tells them, “I sweare by your true friend, my Muse, I loue / Your great profession” (1, 5-6). The occasion for this epigram, however, is as a clarifying addendum to the poem that precedes it in the *Epigrams*, which is a satiric
portrait of a false soldier named Captain Hungry. The title character of the prior epigram is a fraudulent, begging soldier of the type satirized by Brainworm’s disguise. Jonson depicts the false captain as a cadger who trades overblown and patently false stories of faraway military theaters that he has never been to in return for his board at the tavern. “Doe what you come for, Captayne, with your newes,” the speaker in the poem says with a measure of disgust,

That’s, sit, and eate: doe not my eares abuse.
I oft looke on false coyne, to know’t from true:
Not that I loue it, more, then I will you.
Tell the grosse Dutch those grosser tales of yours,
How great you were with their two Emperours;
And yet are with their Princes: Fill them full
Of your Morauian horse, Venetian bull. (1-8)
The epigrams thus clarify Jonson’s views on the vagrant soldiery. He expresses gratitude and honor to true soldiers who have served their country, but contempt and disgust for fraudulent vagrants who affect the pose of a soldier in order to cadge a living.

The same respective views are taken towards soldiers and their fraudulent imitators by the character of Justice Clement in Every Man in his Humor. Clement’s attitudes are displayed in the play’s last act, when Captain Bobadil, a fraudulent soldier who is a more fleshed-out-for-the-stage version of Captain Hungry, shows up at the justice’s house and has himself announced as a soldier. When Clement, himself a military veteran, hears a soldier is outside his gates waiting to see him, he prepares himself to welcome him appropriately, exclaiming, “A sooulder? take down my armor,
my sword, quickly” (5.1.46-47). Clement is honored to receive a fellow soldier and intends to show it by meeting him in military dress, thereby hoping to express a sort of sartorial respect for the profession and establish a spirit of simpatico with his martial guest.

Bobadil, though, is, of course, no real soldier at all, but a poseur, affecting a martial persona in order to sponge off of people who, like Clement, honor the name of soldier. When the very language of Bobadil’s suit for redress in the matter of his having been beaten by Downright reveals him to be an overblown coward, Clement remarks, “O, gods precious! is this the souldier? here, take my armour of quickly, ‘twill make him swoune, I feare; hee is not fit to looke on’t, that will put vp a blow” (5.2.15-17). Like the speaker in Jonson’s epigrams, Clement has the utmost respect for a true soldier, but nothing aside from contempt for an affecting fraud.

This fraudulent type of “soldier,” one who claims to have served as a way of garnering favor, is the type parodied by Brainworm’s disguise as Fitz-sword, when he becomes, as he says, “true counterfeit man of warre, and no souldier” (2.4.22-23). Brainworm’s parody implies a critique of a fraudulent-soldier social type that must have been, itself, a part of the muddy social vagrancy problem. If there was some question about whether or not real discharged soldiers constituted a class of deserving or undeserving poor, there was none about able-bodied vagrants who falsely claimed military service in order to play upon the gratitude of their countryman. Brainworm’s adoption of the soldier disguise exposes the ease with which such a pose could be affected, but the primary vehicle in this play for exposing the fraud of the counterfeit ex-soldier is the braggart warrior, Captain Bobadil.
Bobadil’s boasting in *Every Man in his Humor* seems specifically designed to insinuate himself with gallants who, in return for learning from his military expertise and particularly his “skill” in the “duello,” will foot the bill for his board. He exhibits this tendency in the first scene of the play in which he appears, when after aborting a fencing lesson that he is about to give Matthew, the plagiarizing romantic poet, he announces that they will pick up the lesson after they have had lunch, for which Matthew will have to pay, as Bobadil is broke. Bobadil says, “Come, put on your cloke, and wee’ll goe to some priuate place, where you are acquainted, some tauerne, or so – and haue a bit – Ile send for one of these Fencers, and hee shall breath you, by my direction; and, then, I will teach you your tricke” (1.5.152-156). He then inquires how much money Matthew has, presumably in order to determine what they will be able to eat:

**BOB.** What money ha’ you about you, Mr. MATTHEW?

**MAT.** Faith, I ha’ not past a two shillings, or so.

**BOB.** ’Tis somewhat with the least: but, come. We will haue a bunch of redish, and salt, to tast our wine; and a pipe of tobacco, to close the orifice of the stomach. (1.5.162-167)

Bobadil is clearly a fraudulent soldier, one who uses his “martial experience” as a means of cadging. This character type is a frequent target of satire in Jonson’s early comedies. Like Bobadil, Jonson’s other “Captains,” Shift and Tucca, are not content with simply begging alms, but pretend to military rank, and thus a sort of gentility in their own right. They attempt to parlay this rank into getting themselves credit, thus engaging in a sort of high-level, parasitic cadging. In *Every Man Out of his Humor*, Captain Shift, who is described in the character descriptions fronting the printed text of the play as,
“One that neuer was a Souldier, yet liues vpon lendings,” places ads in St. Paul’s in order to insinuate himself into the company of a young gentleman “whose lands are but new come to his hands” (84-5, 3.3.50). Captain Pantilus Tucca, the braggart soldier of Poetaster, is also colored as a notorious cadger.

In these satiric characterizations of a cadging “soldier,” though, it appears to be particularly the fraudulence of the character’s claims that Jonson derides. He clarifies his intention in the Epigrams when he follows the viciously satiric “To Captayne Hvngry” with the disclaimer, “To Trve Sovldiers.” The distinction that Jonson draws is especially important in the context of discussions of whether discharged soldiers were among the deserving or the undeserving poor. Like Clement, Jonson was himself a soldier, and also like Clement, Jonson appears ready to treat a true former soldier with honor, but he treats a fraud like Bobadil who simply affects the pose in order to cadge a living with scorn and satiric ridicule.

The fraudulence of Bobadil’s claims is in large part anticipated by Brainworm’s disguise as the mendicant soldier Fitz-sword. While disguised as Fitz-sword, Brainworm attempts to bolster his military credentials by describing a highly improbable record of military valor and service. He tells Knowell Jr. and Stephen,

May it please you, sir, in all the late warres of Bohemia, Hungaria, Dalmatia, Poland, where not sir? I haue beene a poore seruitor, by sea and land, any time this fourteene yeeres, and follow’d the fortunes of the best Commanders in christendome. I was shot at the taking of Alepo, once at the reliefe of Vienna; I haue been at Marseille, Naples, and the Adriatique gulf, a gentleman-slaue in the galleys, thrice, where I was most
dangerously shot in the head, through both the thighs, and yet, being thus maym’d, I am void of maintenance, nothing left me but my scares, the noted markes of my resolution. (2.4.58-68)

Brainworm’s inflated account of a service record anticipates the far-fetched plan that Bobadil details later in the play for establishing an army for the queen, “were [he] knowne to her Maiestie” (4.7.65). Both Brainworm’s boasts and Bobadil’s plan contain details so exaggerated that they are self-evidently false, and thus betray the fraud of the military claim altogether.

Moreover, the boastings of Brainworm and Bobadil echo the boasts of the braggart warrior character type in classical comedies. The defining characteristic of this type, as the name implies, is a tendency to inflate accounts of past martial deeds in order to inspire awe in listeners. Pyrgopolynices, the title character in Plautus’ Miles Gloriosus, and a literary ancestor of Bobadil, claims at one point, for example, to have slain a total of 7000 men in a single day (46). Pyrgopolynices is given the lie in his eponymous comedy by his own parasitic servant, Artotrogus, who says, “Periuriorem hoc hominem si quis viderit / aut goloriarum plenoirem quam illic est, / me sibi habeto, ego me mancupio dabo [If anyone ever saw a bigger liar and more colossal braggart than this fellow, he can have me for his own with full legal rights]” (21-23). The boasts are so inflated as to be unbelievable. Bobadil’s plan, like the boasts of Brainworm and Pyrgopolynices, is incredibly far-fetched. It involves his personal training of nineteen of England’s best men in the art of fencing. He goes on to boast,

This done, say the enemie were fortie thousand strong, we twentie would come into the field, the tenth of March, or thereabouts; and wee would
challenge twentie of the enemie; they could not, in their honour, refuse vs, well, wee would kill them: challenge twentie more, kill them; twentie more, kill them; twentie more, kill them too; and thus, would wee kill, every man, his twentie a day, that’s twentie score; twentie score, that’s two hundredth; two hundredth a day, fiue days a thousand; fortie thousand; fortie times fiue, fiuetimes fortie, two hundredth dayes kills them all vp, by computation. And this, will I venture my poor gentleman-like carcase, to performe (prouided, there bee no treason practis’d vpon vs) by faire, and discreet manhood, that is, ciuilly by the sword. (4.7.80-94)

Bobadil’s boast, by its own absurdity – and, for the literate reader, by its similarity to boasts made by classical braggart warriors – proves him fraudulent enough, but the falsity is made more poignant by the fact that Brainworm has previously demonstrated that such stories are easily concocted by vagrants with no military experience whatsoever.

Brainworm’s conscious adoption of the role of “soldier” gives the lie to Bobadil’s affectation.

In addition to harshly satirizing frauds who falsely claimed to have been soldiers, the fraudulent soldier characters in these plays also serve to ridicule the type of gull who is taken in by their affected martial poses. Matthew, the gullible “poet” who is taken in by Bobadil’s posturing, is an example. In *Every Man Out of His Humor*, the gull Sogliardo is similarly bamboozled by Captain Shift’s boasts of valor. Brainworm’s conscious adoption of the mendicant soldier guise also exposes the folly of those willing to believe the lies of a mendicant “soldier.” He exposes Stephen to more ridicule when,
as Fitz-sword, he sells him a worthless rapier by convincing him it is a “most pure Toledo” (2.4.80-81). Stephen’s response, that he “had rather it were a Spaniard,” is yet more evidence of his ignorance of gentlemanly discernment (2.4.82). The rapier eventually also exposes the fraudulent gallantry of Matthew, who, like Stephen, cannot discern a Fleming from a Toledo (3.1.162). Finally, Brainworm’s disguise exposes Justice Clement’s man Formall – just as Bobadil’s affected pose exposes Matthew – as the type of fool who will foot the bill for any cadger claiming to have war stories from abroad.

Formall, noticing that Brainworm looks like he has “beene lately in the warres,” offers to treat him to drinks in return for an account of his service (4.6.64). “Troth sir;” he says, “I would be glad to bestow a pottle of wine o’ you, if it please you to accept it – . . . But, to heare the manner of your seruices, and your deuices in the warres, they say they be very strange” (4.6.67-71). Brainworm’s disguise is instrumental in exposing the fraud of the bogus mendicant soldiers and the folly of gulls who are unable to recognize them as frauds.

The encounter with Formall provides Brainworm with his next disguise, which is that of the Justice’s man himself. Brainworm’s shifting disguises are indicative of his servant status. The disguises make more explicit the vocational mobility that Fumerton identifies as being associated with servants, and Brainworm’s actions while in disguise realize the anxieties about the subversive potential of servant mobility. In this play, though, Jonson channels all of that subversive potential into exposing the affectation and folly of the other characters, as the Fitz-sword disguise does with Stephen, Matthew, and Formall. The disguise as the Justice’s servant provides Brainworm with opportunity for
further exposure of other characters, particularly Bobadil and Matthew. His first interaction with these two while disguised as Formall intensifies the satiric exposure of them as cowardly frauds.

As the scene in which the three meet opens, Bobadil is making absurd excuses to Matthew to explain away his beating at the hands of the rustic Downright – a beating which goes a long way towards exposing Bobadil as a fraud. Rather than avenging himself by dueling, of which he has claimed to be a master, Bobadil, at Matthew’s suggestion, decides to take the safer, and more cowardly, path and sue for justice. The impetus for this decision is Brainworm’s appearance in disguise:

MAT. Doe you heare? ist not best to get a warrant, and haue him arrested, and brought before lustice CLEMENT?

BOB. It were not amisse, would we had it.

MAT. Why here comes his man, let’s speake to him. (4.9.20-23)

Brainworm’s disguise, thus, presents the opportunity to continue the play’s satiric exposure of Bobadil and Matthew as frauds, typical of those that affect the roles of captains and gentlemen in socially mobile London.

Brainworm’s actions as Justice Clement’s man also parody the honesty of justice’s servants themselves, and by implication, the corruption of the Elizabethan civil service administration. Brainworm agrees to serve the warrant on Downright, but only for a sufficient gratuity. “Sir,” he says, “you know my seruice is my liuing, such fauours as these, gotten of my master, is his only preferme nt, and therefore, you must consider me, as I may make benefit of my place. . . . if you will lay mee downe a brace of angels, in my hand, you shall haue [the warrant], otherwise not” (4.9.32-40). One might argue
that the act of grifting here is more a satire of Brainworm’s character than the civil administration; Brainworm is, after all, not really a civil servant. However, as Alan G. R. Smith details, Elizabeth’s conservative insistence on maintaining low taxes and a quasi-feudal patronage system in place of a paid bureaucracy resulted in an administrative system wherein officers had to rely on the gratuities that they could exact by virtue of their office in order to be paid for their service. Smith notes that these gratuities tended to grow increasingly large and in many cases, “soon became indistinguishable from bribes” (238).

Linda Levy Peck’s study of the corruption of the patronage system in this period notes that justice’s servants were seen as particularly notorious offenders in exacting inordinate gratuities. She cites a Stuart tract, *The Just Lawyer his Conscionable Complaint*, as saying that judge’s servants were “so miraculous Machiavellious, that they are able to express two sundry liquors out of one same vessel, making their own profit, by both the parties, to one same suit and controversy” (qtd in Peck 199). This corrupt double-dipping, perceived as typical of a justice’s servant, is exactly what Brainworm appears to have in mind. At the end of the scene, having procured Matthew’s jeweled earring and Bobadil’s stockings, their only visible marks of their “gentility,” Brainworm says to himself, “This is rare! now, will I goe pawne this cloke of the Justice’s mans, at the brokers, for a varlets sute, and be the varlet my selfe; and get either more pawnes, or more monie of DOWNE-RIGHT, for the arrest” (4.9.74-77)

The disguise as Clement’s servant also facilitates Brainworm’s involvement in Wellbred’s and Knowell Jr.’s plot to remove the obstacles to the marriage plot, Knowell Sr., Kitely, and his wife so that Knowell Jr. and Kitely’s sister Bridget may consummate
their secret marriage. The use of disguise in facilitating the romance plot is textbook New Comedy, but even here, the scheme to remove the blocking characters seems to lay more emphasis on exposing their follies as typical results of a socially mobile culture that lends itself to fraudulent affectation and people being out of place with regard to social rank than it does on aiding the romantic marriage of youth.

The satiric exposure of Knowell Sr. and the Kitelies does not so much reveal them to be frauds, like Bobadil, or affectatious gulls, like Stephen and Matthew, but more as persons who are socially out of place and/or unable to differentiate between reality and affectation in the other characters around them. As noted above, Knowell Sr.’s affected moralist stance leads him to misrecognize his son’s love for poetry as moral laxity and therefore inadvertently position himself against a romantic involvement that is actually to his son’s benefit. He also mistakenly identifies Brainworm, his own servant, as a true mendicant soldier. Despite his wise moralizing soliloquies, which would apparently display his ability to see through the affectations of society, he is unable to truly discern either his son or his servant, and Brainworm, playing on his unfounded suspicions, sends him to the waterman Cob’s house, where he thinks to take his son in sexual immorality.

The Kitelies, like old Knowell, are unable to distinguish between affected poses and true motives, which leads them to suspect immorality (mutual infidelity) where there is none and renders them susceptible to being duped by the plotting of Wellbred and Brainworm. In the case of the Kitelies, there is also a satire of persons who find themselves out-of-place with regards to social rank as a result of the new social mobility. The particular object of satire in the Kitelies is marriage between wealthy lower and
poorer upper class members, a phenomenon that itself contributed to the blurring of the line between commoner and gentleman in Elizabethan and Jacobean England.

Lawrence Stone describes the strictly economic nature of many marriages between those from the rich mercantile classes and the financially strapped gentry in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The picture that Stone presents is not of a romantic institution founded on mutual love and trust, but of an arrangement that is financially expedient for the gentry party and facilitates the social ambitions of the wealthy citizen. Stone writes,

Normally the marriage of [an aristocratic] son, especially an eldest son, was a means of raising ready money, often on advantageous terms, and this was a frequent and well-recognized means of clearing off debts. When in 1596 Sir Hugh Cholmley found himself much in debt and unable to clear it off by sale of lands owing to an entail, he dragged his eldest son away from his studies at Cambridge and married him off to a girl with a portion of £2,000. This financial incentive was an important reason why peers tended so swiftly and frequently to take themselves a second wife after the death of the first. (81-82)

The marriage of Kitely and his wife appears to be one of these marriages across class boundaries. Kitely is a wealthy, though common, merchant, and Dame Kitely, though not specifically named as being of gentility, is the sister of Wellbred, whose name implies breeding, and Downright, who is a squire, one of the lower ranking members of the gentry. It seems probable that their marriage is one, like Stone describes, wherein the wealth of a merchant (Kitely) is intended to repair the financial fortunes of a gentle but
poor family (his wife, Wellbred, and Downright). Perhaps because their differing backgrounds with regards to class feed an inferiority complex, Kitely suffers from neurotic jealousy. He is convinced throughout the play that the presence of Wellbred and his gallant friends presents an unpreventable threat to his wife’s fidelity. His neurotic jealousy fuels his wife’s own eventual suspicions, and it seems not unreasonable to guess that the mutual jealousy and lack of intimacy and trust is resultant from their inter-class marriage of financial convenience.

In any case, in the execution of the play’s romance plot, the disguised Brainworm and Wellbred take advantage of the Kitelies’ mistrust of each other, sending each of them to Cob’s house, where they each expect to find the other being unfaithful. At Cob’s they converge with Knowell Sr. in a hilarious catastrophe. The house of the water-bearer Cob, the dwelling of the lowest ranking character in the play and a house that has earlier been described to Cob himself as “such a base, obscure place, as thy house,” is an appropriate setting for this catastrophe in that the physical displacement of the gentlemen characters – in a part of the city not openly frequented by members of their class – mirrors their displacement with regard to rank (1.4.42-43). The play’s gentility is comically dis-placed into a lower social stratum of the city that, so the play argues, fits their inability to discern each other’s motives. As if to drive the point home, Cob interrupts them in the middle of their hullabaloo, and following their lead, mistakes his wife to be running a brothel of sorts. “How?” he asks, “bawd? Is my house come to that?” (4.10.72).

Brainworm’s final disguise is as a sergeant of the law. In this final disguise, attempting to extort money from Downright, Brainworm finally oversteps, and as a
result, he, along with the gulls and frauds, Matthew, Stephen, and Bobadil ends up at Justice Clement’s house, where all of the play’s characters meet and undergo a trial of sorts that separates the sheep from the goats, so to speak. In this final scene, Clement dispenses final verdicts, banishing Bobadil, Matthew, and Stephen from the nuptial merriment to which the rest of the characters are invited. He decrees concerning Bobadil and Matthew, “But, to dispatch away these, you signe o’the Souldier, and picture o’ the Poet (but, both so false, I will not ha’ you hang’d out at my dore till midnight) while we are at supper, you two shall penitently fast it out in my court, without” (5.5.48-52). Appropriately Stephen’s pretensions to gentility are rewarded by his being assigned to eat “i’ the buttrie” with Cob and Tib (5.5.61). As a result of Clement’s verdicts, the play’s characters are put back in their “proper” places. The affectations of moral superiority, military valor, poetic prowess, false gentility, and such are stripped away, and the characters are left with only the rank and privileges that they really merit, which in the case of Bobadil, Matthew, and Stephen, is nothing.

Though Clement’s pronouncements carry the weight of moral authority in the play, finally judging the affectations of the frauds and gulls and admonishing the folly of those who affect overly moral and suspicious humors, as Clement himself notes, it is primarily the machinations of Brainworm, deftly moving from disguise to disguise, that are responsible for their exposure. In the characterization of Brainworm, Jonson exploits the unsettled mobility of the servant type in order to maneuver him through the comic plot, setting up encounters with other characters that expose them as being out of place, either because of their conscious fraudulent affectation or their being out of their proper social place. Unlike the other characters mired in their humors, Brainworm is never out
of place, because he puts no stock in a social place per se. Unlike Stephen, Matthew, or Bobadil, he doesn’t affect any social pretensions. Brainworm’s disguises, though they are just as much false postures as Bobadil’s, are matters of momentary expediency, taken up and put down as the situation demands. They are simply a means of subsistence in that they are necessary to “insinuate” him into his young master’s favor and thus continue his employment. In this regard, Brainworm’s constant displacement as a member of the mobile servant class is a satiric reflection of the pretensions to place made by social climbing pretenders like Matthew or Stephen, who affect to hold an elevated place in the social hierarchy. Their pretensions and affectations are revealed to be as much a matter of fraud and expediency as Brainworm’s disguises. In this play, Jonson shows the vocational mobility of the servant figure to be uncomfortably similar to the social mobility of those who make pretensions to gentility or higher.

IV

The second of Jonson’s humors comedies, like the first, announces in the prefatory matter its dramatic purpose of exposing and ridiculing contemporary vices. As in Every Man in his Humor, the particular vices that are satirized in Every Man Out of his Humor are the vices of fraudulent affectation of an elevated social place or a manifest inequity between personal merit and social rank that seem to accompany Elizabethan social mobility. Also as in his first humors comedy, in the second, Jonson employs characters from the unsettled lower classes, characters much like the servant figure Brainworm, as satiric expositors, whose machinations and commentary expose and ridicule the error and affectation of the characters pretending to elevated social positions.
Although the emphasis on social satire is already heightened in Jonson’s revision of the classical comic paradigm in *Every Man in his Humor*, in *Every Man Out of his Humor*, Jonson ratchets up the social satire even further. The intensification of the satiric element can be seen in the severe tone of the latter play’s Induction, especially when compared with the relatively gentle tone of the Prologue to the former. In the Induction to *Every Man Out of his Humor*, the “Presenter,” Asper, says of the purpose of “his” play,

> . . . I will scourge those apes;
> And to these courteous eyes oppose a mirrour,
> As large as is the stage, whereon we act:
> Where they shall see the times deformitie
> Anatomiz’d in euery nerue, and sinnew,
> With constant courage, and contempt of feare. (117-22)

Anne Barton describes the progressive development of the satiric element in Jonson’s early comedies as follows: “In *Every Man in His Humour*, the impulse to correct could be glossed over as the random frolic of two lively young men, a clever servant and an eccentric justice. Jonson’s next comedy was very different. In *Every Man Out of His Humour*, the exhibition and mockery of fools become the serious business of the play” (62).

This intensification of the social satire is reflected in the structure of the play as well. In *Every Man Out of his Humor*, Jonson abandons the New Comedy plot for a more episodic structure that lends itself even more readily to a “dramatic emphasis on character at the cost of incident” (Herford & Simpson 1.343). Jonson anticipates criticism of the novel plot structure by noting the play’s classical precedent in the
Induction’s dialogue between the two “observers” of the play, Mitis and Cordatus. Towards the end of the Induction, Mitis asks Cordatus, “You haue seene his play, Cordatvs? pray you, how is’t?” Cordatus replies, “Faith sir, I must refraine to iudge, only this I can say of it, ’tis strange, and of a particular kind by it self, somewhat like *Vetus Comœdia*” (228-32). The term *Vetus Comœdia*, or Old Comedy, invokes the ancient Greek comedies of Aristophanes, which are, like *Every Man Out of his Humor*, relatively loose in structure and given to relatively harsh and profane ridicule of flawed characters.

Jonson’s servant figures in the latter humors play develop in ways consistent with the progressive development of satiric emphasis in the comic paradigm. Carlo Buffone and Macilente, the satiric servant figures in *Every Man Out of his Humor* are less tied to a literary inheritance from the Roman slave type than Brainworm, and their methods of ridicule and exposure depend much less on typically New Comic scheming and deception than out and out satiric commentary.¹²

In addition to the ways in which the servant figures in the second humors comedy evolve with respect to their literary inheritance from classicism and function within the comic plot, there are also marked differences in the social type of the servant figures that Jonson employs as satiric expositors here. To begin with, the “servant” figures¹³ in this comedy are not in fact, servants.

Carlo Buffone is a tavern railer, described in the character sketches as a “Publike, scurrilous, and prophane Iester” (25-26). Matthew Steggle, in an article entitled, “Charles Chester and Ben Jonson,” explores the validity of a claim made by John Aubrey that the characterization of Carlo Buffone is based on an actual historical tavern railer, one Charles Chester, whose “particular gift . . . is for insulting people, through which he
earns a living in taverns” (316). Steggle concludes that though the satire of an “actual person” is appropriate for the type of Aristophanic satire that Jonson employs in *Every Man Out of his Humor*, there is more literary depth to Carlo than the simple transposition of a person to the stage will account for. Steggle argues, “One does not want to reduce Carlo to a mere indexical shadow of his model” (322). Steggle’s exploration does, though, reveal at least one actual example of a contemporary social type, a tavern railler, who occupies the same unsettled and potentially subversive place within the social hierarchy as the servant figure that Brainworm represented in *Every Man in his Humor*.

Macilente, on the other hand, is a scholar. Somewhat like Jonson at the time of the play’s writing, he possesses the education and qualifications for civic office, but lacks sufficient wealth or patronage to hold any official place. Neither character, strictly speaking, is in the service of anyone. However, both characters display the same “out of place,” unsettled, and itinerant nature that Fumerton describes as typical of the servant and apprentice classes in Elizabethan England. And like their predecessor Brainworm, in the course of the play, their unsettled and mobile natures represent a subversive threat that exposes and ridicules those in the play who are shown as unworthily enjoying the privileges of office and elevated social rank. These humors characters, the objects of the satire in the play, are depicted as being unworthily privileged either because they fraudulently affect a social position that they do not in fact hold or because their personal virtues – virtues here being understood in a comprehensive sense including civic and martial abilities, not only moral probity – do not merit the privileges appertaining to their class rank.
This satire of the seeming inequity between characters’ elevated rank and their lack of virtues commensurate with their places in society is thoroughgoing in Jonsonian comedy, which consistently indicts English society to the extent that it is not a meritocracy. Jonson’s satiric indictment is part of a conversation current in late Elizabethan and Stuart England regarding the true nature of nobility, i.e. what qualities make one “noble”. One of the more comprehensive discussions of the question is Giovanni Battista Nenna’s *A Discourse Whether a Noble Man by Birth or a Gentleman by Desert is Greater in Nobilitie*, which was translated by Sir William Jones and published in England in 1600.

Nenna’s book tells the story of a debate between two Italian gentlemen, Possidonio and Fabricio, over who is the more worthy to wear the ring of the young lady, Virginia, who has left her ring to be bestowed on “him that is the most noble” of the two (3). In the debate that ensues, Possidonio asserts that he is the more truly noble on account of his more ancient family pedigree and his greater wealth, asserting that “true and perfit nobilitie doth consist in bloud, and riches” (24). Fabricio, on the other hand, asserts his virtues and learning as the qualities which validate his noble claims. The inscriptions on each side of Virginia’s ring leave little doubt that it is an emblem meant to give ultimate legitimacy to one claim of nobility over the other: the one side inscribed, “Dignus coronabitur ipsa, Let the most worthy be crowed herewith,” and the other, “Victor, & merito coronatus; I am crowned herewith as the conquerour, and that by desart” (3). The arguments of Possidonio and Fabricio cover virtually every rhetorical defense employed by sixteenth century contemporaries for their respective positions. In the end, Nenna himself, who has been appointed arbiter in the case, though he refuses to
assert that either claim is completely without merit, judges in favor of virtue as the more deserving claim to nobility:

As for me, I will exalt such as ought to bee preferred before any other men living, and those from whom true nobilitie proceedeth: which opinion because it agreeth with reason I intende to followe. Wherefore I saie, that like as it is a thing worthy greater commendation, to builde a new palace, to stoare it with mouables, and to inhabite it, then it is onlie to dwel therein: so is he worthy of far more greater glorie who of himselfe becommeth noble, then hee who is simplie borne noble: and for this cause therefore (and many more, no lesse pregnant, then true reasons heretofore alleadged,) I judge, and determine this: that the nobility of the minde, is farre more true, and farre more perfect, then the nobility of blood conioyned with riches. (96)

Nenna’s judgment regarding the nature of “true nobility” is seconded in the commendatory verses prefaced to the English translation of his text by Edmund Spenser, Samuel Daniel, and sometime Jonson collaborator George Chapman. The ideal of nobility founded on virtue is also articulated in Richard Jones’s *The Booke of Honor and Armes*. Jones writes concerning the fine distinctions of social rank, “But to returne vnto disequalitie of noble persons, I say that the true nobilitie of men, is *Vertue*, and that he is truelie noble that is vertuous, bee he borne of high or of lowe Parents. And the more highlie he be borne, the worse reputation he meriteth, if he cannot continue the honor left him by his Ancestors” (34-35). Jones’s statement implies an assertion – one taken up explicitly in Nenna’s text – that even noble bloodlines themselves are founded upon the
virtuous deeds of ancestors and that if the virtues are not continued by the “noble” descendents of the bloodline, then, regardless of the conferred title of rank, they merit no honor due to nobility.

John Selden’s painstakingly researched *Titles of Honor* makes the same assertion with regards to the necessity of virtue in confirming the “nobility” of blood. Selden contends,

So that, Merit by Qualitie, both in the first acquiring the Princes fauor, and in his issue, are the true causes of Nobilitie, as if the originall collation of the Dignitie were so made, that the first deseruing, and his begotten heires, such only as were deseruing, should enjoy it. . . . Virtue plainly ennobleth not ciuilly, but is a deseruing cause of it only, wherof the Prince must iudge. If *Honor* and deseruing *Vertue* accompanie not each other, its his Fault or Error. They should alwaies so. (Preface, b4.verso-c1.recto)

Jonson’s indictment of undeserving nobility – such as the satirical characterization of Sogliardo and Puntarvolo in *Every Man Out of His Humor* – seems to be based an idealized concept of nobility-as-meritocracy like the one advanced in the works of Nenna, Jones, and Selden, for whose book Jonson provided a laudatory poem. In some of the musings on personal “greatness” gathered in the *Discoveries*, Jonson asserts that “it is Vertue that gives glory” (1497-98). In the poem that prefaces Selden’s work, Jonson even criticizes himself as a poet for having written poems of praise for those “noble” personages, who, by their subsequent lack of virtues, have shown themselves unworthy of the honor conferred by his verses, a fault which he praises Selden for avoiding in his survey of English titles and honors:
Though I confess (as every Muse hath err'd,  
And mine not least) I have too oft prefer'd  
Men past their terms; and praise'd some names too much:  
But 'twas, with purpose, to have made them such.
Since, being deceiv'd, I turn a sharper eye  
Upon my self; and ask, to whom, and why,  
And what I write: and vex it' manie dayes,  
Before men get a verse, much lesse a prayse. (19-26)

Jonson’s protest of his intention to praise only virtue is an accurate description of the  
poetics of his epigrammatic laudatory verse. When praising noble persons, he  
consistently notes the ways in which they either have proven their heritage with virtuous  
deeds or else the promise they have of doing so in the future. Conversely, his  
epigrammatic satires, though they refrain from naming names, scornfully castigate they  
type of noble who is devoid of virtue. The second epigram to “Sir Cod the Perfumed,”  
for instance, indicts a knight who foolishly spends his estate on his scent to the detriment  
of cultivating any inner virtues. “Th’expense in odours is a most vaine sinne,” he poet  
admonishes the knight, “Except thou could’st, Sir Cod, weare them within” (1-2).

The pictures of unworthy gulls in positions of preferment in the satiric epigrams,  
like the characterization of the gentlemen fools Puntarvolo, Sogliardo, et. al. and the  
affecting poseurs like Fastidious Briske in Every Man Out of his Humor, points to the  
extent to which preferment to office or title did not necessarily accord with merit at the  
end of the sixteenth century in England. The implication in many of these  
characterizations is that the commercialization of patronage has resulted in preferment
falling on those whose only claim to nobility is founded upon riches, the qualification which is described as the least legitimate for nobility in Nenna, Jones, and Selden. In short, honor and virtue have ceased to habitually accompany each other in the outworking of late Elizabethan patronage. Like Selden, Jonson’s satiric servants in *Every Man Out of his Humor* see this state of patronage as unjust, and it rankles them, particularly Macilente.

Neither Buffone nor Macilente can accurately be described as “settled and contented in their degree” (Stone 15). Macilente is, in fact, described as being quite the opposite of content. In describing his character, Jonson writes that he, “(wanting that place in the world’s account, which he thinks his merit capable of) falls into such an envious apoplexy, with which his judgement is so dazeled, and distasted, that he growes violently impatient of any opposite happinesse in another” (Character Descriptions 9-13). It is the kinetic unsettledness and discontent of these two characters that shakes up the social scene in *Every Man Out of his Humor*, and the satiric result of their agitation is to expose – and ridicule – the fraud and/or unworthiness of those who hold or affect to hold an inflated social position.

Carlo’s volatile nature is well attested to throughout the play. In addition to describing him as a profane jester, the character descriptions go on to say, “His religion is rayling, and his discourse ribaldry. They stand highest in his respect, whom he studies most to reproch” (33-34). Puntarvolo, the ridiculously archaic knight, calls him a “grand scourge; or, second vntrusse of the time,” a “ban-dogge,” and a “iester” (2.3.97, 103, 214). Macilente describes both Carlo’s parasitic nature and his propensity towards harsh and satiric insult as follows:
O, ‘tis an open-throated, black mouth’d curre,
A slaue, that to your face will (serpent-like)
Creepe on the ground, as he would eae the dust;
And to your backe will turne the taile, and sting
More deadly then a scorpion. (1.2.231-236)

The most definitive summary of Carlo’s subversive character is perhaps provided by
Cordatus, the “Authors friend,” during a choral interlude in the Induction (Character
Sketches 111). Cordatus says,

He is one, the Author calls him CARLO BVFFONE, an impudent
common iester, a violent rayler, and an incomprehensible Epicure; one,
whose company is desir’d of all men, but belou’d of none; hee will sooner
lose his soule then a iest, and prophane euen the most holy things, to
excite laughter: no honorable or reuerend personage whatsoeuer, can
come within the reach of his eye, but is turn’d into all manner of varietie,
by his adult’rate simile’s. (356-364)

As Cordatus indicates, Buffone’s primary method of satiric exposition is verbal,
through explicit ridicule of the follies of other characters. Carlo most commonly delivers
his jests in response to another character’s dialogue, and his responses ubiquitously tend
to expose and ridicule the absurdity as well as deflate the pretension in the subject of the
dialogue just delivered, the speech itself, the character speaking, or some combination of
the three.

His first lines in the play proper are of this nature. As the second scene opens, he
appears on stage with the gull, Sogliardo, in what by their ensuing dialogue appears to be
the capacity of an advisor. Sogliardo announces to Carlo that he is on his way to the city to purchase his gentility. “Nay looke you CARLO: this is my Humour now! I haue land and money, my friends left me well, and I will be a Gentleman, whatsoeuer it cost me” (1.2.1-3). Carlo responds, “A most gentleman-like resolution” (1.2.4). The flat, deadpan response contains a double-edged satiric jest. On one hand, the irony in the statement reveals that Sogliardo’s resolution to buy his gentility is, in fact, a most un-gentlemanlike resolution. On the other hand, the response is an indictment of the commercialization of the late Elizabethan patronage system, which did allow many personages who, like Sogliardo, were perceived as entirely lacking in what Selden describes as the “deserving Vertue” that should “accompanie” the honor of nobility, to nonetheless purchase the rank of gentility.

The degeneration of the gentleman class is further stressed in Carlo’s following commentary on what a good gentleman Sogliardo will make. Carlo says of the propriety of Sogliardo’s name, which means fool, for a gentleman, “I know many Sogliardos gentlemen” (1.2.13-14). He goes on to advise Sogliardo on how he must behave as a gentleman. His advice, though, is again an ironic indictment of the abuses of the newly made gentry at the end of the sixteenth century and a parody of the kind of advice tracts that genuinely purported to instruct the gentleman newly come to London. An example of the latter can be found in Henry Pecham’s *The Art of Living in London*, which advises its readers not to go deeply into debt, to maintain housekeeping at their country estate, and to make few and true friends, etc. The author’s moralizing advice is summed up when he ends by instructing his readers “To serve God, avoid Idlenesse, to keepe your
money, and to beware of ill company” (7). Carlo’s “advice” to Sogliardo is entirely of an opposite nature. He tells Sogliardo,

First (to be an accomplisht gentleman, that is, a gentleman of the time) you must giue o’re house-keeping in the countrey, and liue altogether in the city amongst gallants; where, at your first appearance, ‘twere good you turn’d foure or fiue hundred acres of your best land into two or three trunks of apparel . . . and be sure you mixe your selfe stil, with such as flourish in the spring of the fashion, and are least popular . . . learne to play at Primero and Passage, and (euer when you lose) ha’ two or three peculiar othes to sweare by, that no man else swear s: but aboue all, protest in your play, and affirme, Vpon your credit; As you are a true gentleman (at euery cast) you may doe it with a safe conscience, I warrant you. (1.2.37-51).

Carlo goes on to instruct Sogliardo to get himself in debt, hire servants and not pay them, pretend to know important people whom he doesn’t actually know, and a host of other vices of those who pretend to gentility. The instruction is really less advice than it is direct satiric criticism of the social class of would-be gentlemen in London at the time.

For his part, Sogliardo, like Stephen in Every Man in his Humor, is a parvenu gull and a would-be gentleman who mistakes the trappings of gentility – and the foolish ones at that – for gentility itself. He is described as “an essentiall Clowne, . . . so enamour’d of the name of a Gentleman, that he will haue it, though he buyes it. He comes vp euery Terme to learne to take Tabacco, and see new Motions. He is in his kingdome when he can get himselfe into company, where he may be well laught at” (Character Descriptions
78-82). Sogliardo, though, is clearly in possession of the financial means to be a gentleman. He has inherited sufficient lands to buy a coat of arms and engage in the conspicuous consumption typical of the London gentry. That he is rich enough to live as a gentleman, however, only makes it more pernicious that he, like Stephen, is a fool that cannot distinguish appearance from reality, particularly with regard to personal merit. Like Stephen and Matthew, he is completely taken in by a fraudulent soldier, Captain Shift, whom he hires to teach him how to smoke tobacco, and whom he entrusts so much that he calls him his “Resolution” (4.6.30). That he has taken the openly parasitic Carlo on as an advisor shows his ineptitude as a gentleman of discernment. He hungrily swallows Carlo’s absurd, and at times criminal, “instruction” of how to act gentlemanly. “O admirable rare!” he declares after hearing it, “he cannot choose but be a gentleman, that ha’s these excellent gifts: more, more, I beseech you” (1.2.52-54).

As if Sogliardo’s foolishness were not sufficiently self-evident to drive the satiric critique of the new-moneyed gentry home, Carlo provides the audience with a running commentary on his folly throughout much of the play. Upon meeting Macilente, Carlo describes Sogliardo’s lack of intelligence to the scholar in no uncertain terms. He calls him “a trout, a shallow foole, he ha’s no more braine then a butter-flie, a meere stuff suit, he looks like a mustie bottle, new wickerd, his head’s the corke, light, light” (1.2.199-201). Later in the play, when Sogliardo finally purchases his coat of arms, Carlo comments on the propriety of the heraldry in a way that, again, reinforces the absurdity of Sogliardo’s rise to gentility. Sogliardo describes the insignia to his fellows as follows: “Mary, sir, it is your Bore without a head Rampant” (3.4.61). His risible device sets him up as the butt of Carlo’s satiric joke:
PVNT. A Boore without a head, that’s very rare!

CARL. I, and rampant too: troth, I commend the Heralds wit, hee has deciphered him well: A swine without a head, without raine, wit, anything indeed, ramping to gentilitie. (3.4.62-67)

Carlo’s jests at Sogliardo’s expense not only consistently expose and ridicule the absurd inequity in Sogliardo’s achieving the status, privileges and civic responsibility that traditionally accompanies the rank of gentleman, but also imply that Sogliardo’s situation is not that uncommon. The implicit absurdity of the advancement to gentility of gulls like Sogliardo is not only in their undeserving participation in the privileges of the upper classes, but in their entire inability to execute the civic leadership that was seen to be the responsibility of gentlemen. At this time in England, there was still a sense, latent from feudalism, that a gentleman should have some martial and civic responsibility to the country. This sense can be clearly inferred from Selden’s discussion of the origins of nobility and from Jonson’s epigrams in praise of specific nobles, several of which are examined specifically in the next chapter. The way in which Sogliardo “ramps” his way into the upper classes of English society by purchasing his gentility is not atypical of the social mobility of late Elizabethan times, and Jonson uses Carlo’s jests, in part, to critique the inequity between personal worth and rank that results from this commercialized social mobility. Macilente drives the point home in a more explicit manner when, as he listens in on the conversation between Soglario and Carlo in Act One, he remarks regarding Sogliardo’s fortunes,

Torment and death! breake head and braine at once,

To be deliuer’d of your fighting issue.
Who can endure to see blinde *Fortune* dote thus?
To be enamour’d on this dustie turfe?
This clod? a whorson puck-fist? O god, god, god, god, &c.
I could runne wild with griefe now, to behold
The ranknesse of her bounties, that doth breed
Such bull-rushes; these mushrompe gentlemen,
That shoot vp in a night to place and worship. (1.2.155-163)

Macilente’s lament emphasizes the satiric critique Carlo has been making of those who unworthily hold or affect to hold elevated social place. The last lines of his rant also expose the rapid, and therefore suspect, rise to gentility of many of the newly moneyed. Whereas Carlo’s jesting exposes and deflates the pretensions of characters like Sogliardo, Macilente’s lamenting soliloquies question the justice of their possession of the privileges of elevated rank in society.

Sogliardo is not the only target of the satiric critique of Macilente and Carlo in this play, by any means. Another prominent target is the affecting court poseur, Fastidious Briske. Like Sogliardo, Briske is depicted as pretending to gentility, but whereas Sogliardo at least possesses the financial means to be a gentleman, Briske’s pretensions to an elevated social position are entirely affected and fraudulent. Briske maintains the guise of courtly gentility by acting out the ironic “instructions” for being a gentleman that Carlo gives to Sogliardo in Act One. In the Character Descriptions, Briske is described as a “Neat, spruce, affecting Courtier, one that weares clothes well, and in fashion” (36-37). Though he does have a certain sartorial proficiency, he does not possess the money necessary to maintain his wardrobe, and puts himself into deep debt in
order to keep himself in the latest fashions. He affects a courtly appearance by imitating
the conversation and behaviors of gentility. He “practiseth by his glasse how to salute;
speakes good remnants . . . cares not what Ladies fauour he belyes, or great Mans
familiarity. . . . He will borrow another mans horse to praise, and backs him as his owne”
(37-43). The summary judgment of him in his character description reveals the extent to
which he is all external affectation when it says that he is “a good property to perfume the
boot of a coach” (41).

Briske’s courtly pose is depicted as completely fraudulent, and Carlo’s satiric
jests reveal his fraud and deflate his pretensions as effectively as they do Sogliardo’s.
When Carlo introduces him to Sogliardo, for instance, his description strips Briske of his
affectations and presents him as he really is. Sogliardo asks who Briske is, and Carlo
responds,

    Who, hee? a gull, a foole, no salt in him i’ the earth man: hee looks like a
fresh salmon kept in a tub, hee’le be spent shortly. His braine’s lighter
then his feather already, and his tongue more subiect to lie, then that’s to
wag: he sleepes with a muske-cat euery night, and walkes all day hang’d
in pomander chaines for penance: he ha’s his skin tan’d in ciuet, to make
his complexion strong, and the sweetnesse of his youth lasting in the sense
of his sweet lady. A good emptie puffe, he loues you well, Signior.

(2.1.93-102)

Earlier in the same scene, Carlo deflates Briske’s affected appearance of a courtier when
he first encounters him in the street and compares him to “one of these motions, in a great
antique clock: he would shew well vpon a habberdashers stall, at a corner shop, rarely”
(2.1.6-8). Carlo goes on to question the authenticity of Briske’s courtly guise and take a jab at his loose sexual morals, perhaps the only genuine “courtly” quality he possesses, when he inquires to where he is bound:

   CARL. . . . whither were you riding now, Signior?

   FAST. Who, I? what a silly jest’s that? whither should I ride, but to the court?

   CARL. O, pardon me, sir, twenty places more: your hot-house, or your whore-house – (2.1.11-16)

Later in the act, Carlo’s biting aside gives the lie to Briske’s alleged court connections. After Briske has finished dropping several prominent names of his “friends” at court, Carlo tops his speech, saying, “There’s ne’re a one of these, but might lie a week on the racke, ere they could bring forth his name” (2.3.189-90). Carlo’s jesting reveals Briske, as it does Sogliardo, as one whose gentility is entirely comprised of an affected courtly appearance, and his exposure and ridicule imply a satire of many “courtiers” in Elizabethan London who are taken for gentlemen simply because they are able, primarily by means of credit and running up debt, to mimic the consumptive habits of the gentleman class.

   Macilente’s commentary, as it does in the case of Sogliardo, reinforces Carlo’s satire of Briske and the implication that Briske is typical of a common species of “courtiers” who take advantage of the blurred hierarchy in the socially mobile culture of the era. For example, in one of the play’s episodes, as the characters are gathered at the merchant Deliro’s house, Briske is lauding the virtues of showing a good appearance at
court. While Deliro’s wife, Fallace, is taken in by his façade, Macilente is not, and his ironic rejoinder critiques both Briske and the court that will have him:

FAST. O, believe it, sir; your good face is the witch, and your apparel the spells, that bring all the pleasures of the world into their circle.

FALL. Ah, the sweet grace of a courtier!

MACI. Well, would my father had left mee but a good face for my portion yet; though I had shar’d the vnfortunate wit that goes with it, I had not car’d: I might haue past for somewhat i’ the world then. (2.6.37-44)

Macilente’s comment points out the glaring gap between Briske’s affected courtly appearance and his lack of “wit” to accompany it. The implication is that the latter should be prized over the former, but to Macilente’s chagrin, the world of the play, which represents late Elizabethan London, is populated with those who value external appearances over inward virtues, the latter of which they appear unable to discern with any right judgment. Fallace, for instance, as her expostulation indicates, is entirely taken in by Briske’s fraud and is absurdly enamored of him. Her brother, Fungoso, a first generation gentleman, likewise mistakes Briske’s façade for the reality of gentility, and wastes all of the money his father gives him for his studies at the Inns of Court on clothes as he tries to keep up with Briske’s ever-changing wardrobe. Macilente singles out Fungoso, whose name identifies him with the “mushrompe gentlemen” that Macilente has previously indicted, for satiric treatment during one of the scenes where the young gentleman promenades onto the stage in a new suit that he has purchased to emulate Briske. Macilente rails,

I faine would know of heauen now, why yon foole
Should weare a suit of satin? he? that rooke?
That painted jay, with such a deale of outside?
What is his inside trow? ha, ha, ha, ha, ha.
A number of these popenjayes there are,
Whom, if a man conferre, and but examine
Their inward merit, with such men as want;
Lord, lord, what things they are! (2.5.40-48)

Macilente’s reference to “a number of these popenjayes” extends the satire to Elizabethan society at large. As Carlo had noted that England around 1600 was full of Sogliardos who had fallen into good fortune and “ramped” to gentility, regardless of their merit, so Macilente notes the ubiquity of attaching importance to appearance in London culture. The lament of society’s concern with appearance, and particularly dress, is echoed in other Elizabethan moralists as well. William Harrison, in a parenthetical passage that interrupts his description of sartorial habits in England, complains, “Oh, how much cost is bestowed nowadays upon our bodies and how little upon our souls! How many suits of apparel hath the one, and how little furniture hath the other! How long time is asked in decking up of the first, and how little space is left wherein to feed the latter!” (146). Sir John Davies’ satiric poem, “Of a Gull,” describes a man who, like Briske, or Sogliardo, Matthew, Stephen, or Bobadil is all outside, adorning himself with the clothing and trappings of a brave gallant, but lacking the wit, sense, or courage that should accompany the rank he pretends to. Davies writes,

A gull is he, who feares a velvet gowne,
And when a wench is brave, dares not speake to her:
A gull is he which traverseth the towne,
And is for marriage knowne a common wooer.
A gull is he, which while he proudlie weares
A silver hilted Rapier by his side:
Indures the lyes, and Knockes about the eares,
Whilst in his sheath, his sleeping sword doth bide.
A gull is he which weares good hansome cloathes,
And standes in presence stroaking up his hayre:
And fillest up his unperfect speech with othes,
But speakes not one wise word throughout the yeere:
But to define a gull in termes precise,
A gull is he which semes, and is not wise. (5-18)

The persistent goal of the satiric criticism of Carlo and Macilente seems to be the deflation of the gap between the other characters’ affected appearance and real personal merit. That is to say, their ironic barbs, asides, and line-topping jests consistently strip away the façade of courtliness or gentility, and reveal the character bound up in his affecting humors to be the gull that he really is. The kind of deflating satire that Jonson employs in the commentary of Carlo and Macilente, and the means by which he employs it, i.e. the stichomythic asides, has been noted by classical critic Stephen Halliwell in the comedies of Aristophanes, the “Vetus Comedia [Old Comedy]” invoked by Jonson in the Induction to Every Man Out. Like Jonson, Aristophanes often creates satiric deflation by using stichomythic conversation between a pompous master and a sardonic slave. In Frogs, for example, Dionysus’ slave, Xanthias often wryly deflates his own master’s
speech and action, revealing the disparity between his divine nature and lowbrow human behavior. A typical instance of this interplay occurs in *Frogs* when Aeacus, a gatekeeper of the underworld, mistakes Dionysus for Heracles and, threatening retribution for the stealing of Cerberus, causes the god of wine to soil himself out of fear. Xanthias upbraids his master for his cowardice: “ο δειλοτατε θεων συ κανθρωπων” [You’re the worst coward in heaven and earth]” (486). Dionysus responds, rather weakly, in self defense only to be sarcastically mocked by his slave again:

**ΔΙΟΝΥΣΥΣ** εγω; πως δειλος οστις σπογγιαν ηπησα σε; ου ταν ετερος γ ειργασατ ανηρ.

**ΞΑΝΤΗΙΑΣ** αλλα πι;

**ΔΙΟΝΥΣΥΣ** κατεκει ταν οσφραινομενος, ειπερ δειλος ην,

**ΞΑΝΤΗΙΑΣ** ανδρια γ ο Ποσειδον.

[DIONYSUS. Who me, a coward? Me, who asked you for a sponge, something no other man would have dared?

XANTHIAS. Well, what would he have done?

DIONYSUS. If he were a coward, he’d have lain there in his own stink.

But I got up, and wiped myself too.

XANTHIAS. Poseidon, what bravery!

Xanthias mocks his master again in conversation with a slave of Pluto’s. Pluto’s slave lauds Dionysus’ civility and manners, saying, “ην τον Δια τον σωτηρα, γενναδας...
ανήρ ο δέσποτης σου [By Zeus the Savior, that master of yours is a gentleman,]” to which, Xanthias responds, “‘πως γαρ οὐχὶ γενναδας, ὦστις γε πίνειν οἶδε καὶ βινεῖν μονον;’ [Of course he’s a gentleman; all he knows is boozing and balling]” (738-740).

In Every Man Out of his Humor, Jonson uses this type of stichomythia for deflating satiric commentary, particularly in the lines of Carlo Buffone, as can be seen above in his conversation with Briske. Carlo’s stichomythic barbs are perhaps most prominent, though, in the satiric treatment that he gives to Puntarvolo. Puntarvolo is a “Vaine-glorious Knight” who equates his position with romantic notions of knight-errantry, wooing, and adventuring, rather than accepting the social responsibilities, such as housekeeping and attending to his tenants, that should come with his position. In the second act of the play, Puntarvolo, true to his absurdly chivalric nature, is discovered enacting a daily ritual in which he approaches his castle in the guise of a knight errant and woos his wife, who plays the part of a maiden of the castle. Carlo, hidden on stage with Sogliardo and Briske, repeatedly follows Puntarvolo’s overly romantic speeches with one-line rejoinders that expose their antiquated absurdity. For instance, when Puntarvolo asks after the lord of the castle, which is, of course, himself, Carlo’s responses reveal and mock the charade:

PVNT. What complexion, or what stature beares he?

GENT [his wife]. Of your stature, and very neere vpon your complexion.

PVNT. Mine is melancholy:

CARL. So is the dogges, iust. (2.2.43-46)
PVNT. Would I might see his [the lord’s] face.

CARL: Shee should let down a glasse from the window at that word, and request him to looke in’t. (2.2.73-75)

Following his wife’s archaic and formulaic medieval speech, which is obviously scripted, stating her intent to let Puntarvolo into his own house, Carlo’s rhetorical question gives the lie to their affected fiction:

PVNT. Most admir’d lady, you astonish me!

CARL. What? with speaking a speech of your owne penning? (2.3.61-3)

Carlo’s stichomythic rejoinders repeatedly deflate the absurd chivalric affectation of Puntarvolo’s medieval scene – likely an implicit satire of the emptiness of claims to “antiquity” of bloodlines – and render him ridiculous, just as Xanthias’ barbs deflate Dionysus’ pretensions to bravery. In this regard, Carlo is an heir of the Aristophanic slave much as Brainworm is of the Plautine slave, and just as Jonson adapts the satiric role of the Roman slave to a contemporary servant type in developing the character of Brainworm, so he adapts the satiric role of the satyr-like slave of Old Comedy in this play as well, placing the biting commentary in the mouth of a tavern railer, a sort of itinerant fool.

The late classical critic Evanthius, whose essay on comedy, along with that of Donatus, was prefaced to Renaissance editions of Terence,\(^\text{16}\) describes the coarse satire of the Greek satyr play, the immediate successor to Old Comedy, in language that could just as well be describing the railing of Carlo in *Every Man Out of his Humor*: “Satyr play took the form of a poem in which, through the device of crude and, as it were, rustic jesting, attacked the vices of citizens without mentioning specific names” (303).
Donatus’s account of the development of Greek Old Comedy describes a similar tone of rough insult:

When the Athenians, the guardians of Attic propriety, wanted to rebuke anyone for an immoral life, they used to gather together from all sides, happily and eagerly, at the villages and crossroads. There they used to describe the vices of individuals publicly and with proper names. Comedy was named from this custom. (306)

The spirit of Greek Old Comedy is, according to Evanthis and Donatus, characterized by a rustic and rude, public calling down of vices. This spirit is imminently discernible in Carlo Buffone’s deflating raillery.

Halliwell observes a similar deflation of pretense in Acharnians in the interaction between the braggart warrior, Lamachus, and the pacifist farmer, Dicaeopolis. He notes, “The satirical effect is developed mainly in terms of the disparity between the self-esteeming and pompous behaviour of Lamachus and the picture of his supposedly true nature which is presented assertively by Dicaeopolis and eventually vindicated by the action of the play” (11). Similarly, in Every Man Out of his Humor, the “satiric effect” is not entirely dependent upon the biting jests of Carlo Buffone or Macilente’s parenthetical social commentary. The action of the play seconds the satiric dialogue in displaying the disparity between the characters’ pretentious affectations and their true natures.

Fastidious Briske’s courtly affectations, for instance are revealed to be fraudulent when he goes to court, accompanied by Macilente, to woo his lady, Saviolina – whose own reputation for courtly graces is shown to be vastly overstated. Macilente’s report of
Briske’s appearance at court gives the lie to his pretensions to being an arch-courtier.

The scholar tells Deliro upon their return,

    Alas, the poore phantasticke! hee’s scarce knowne
    To any lady there; and those that know him,
    Know him the simplest man of all they know;
    Deride, and play upon his amorous humours,
    Though he but apishly doth imitate
    The gallant’st courtiers, kissing ladies pumps,
    Holding the cloth for them, praising their wits,
    And seruilely obseruing euery one,
    May doe them pleasure: fearefull to be seene
    With any man (though he be ne’re so worthy)
    That’s not in grace with some, that are the greatest.
    Thus courtiers doe, and these he counterfeits. (4.2.29-40)

In the latter half of the play, Macilente’s devious machinations become the chief means of satiric exposure in the play, beginning with his outing of Briske to Deliro.

From this scene onward, Macilente directs a series of intertwining plots that put the other characters into situations that expose their humorous affectations. When Deliro hears that Briske is a fraud, he repents that he “e’re credited him so much” and decides to call in his debts, which, of course, Briske has no way of paying (4.2.56).

After outing the fraudulent courtier to his creditor, Macilente presents a challenge to Puntarvolo and Briske, who are both enamored of the lady Saviolina, that he can expose her reputation for courtly grace as undeserved. He contrives to do this by
presenting Sogliardo to her, under the color of a contest to see whether she can detect him as a nobleman, though he imitates “a rusticke, or a clowne” (5.2.43). Of course, though Sogliardo botches his attempt at courtly speech and action, Saviolina asserts that she can easily discern his gentility, saying to Puntarvolo and Briske, “Nay, if you would haue tried my wit, indeed, you should neuer haue told me he was a gentleman, but presented him for a true clowne indeede; and then haue seene if I could haue decipher’d him” (5.2.79-83). She is effectively gulled when Sogliardo reveals his rough hands to come from “holding the plough,” and her reputation for discerning courtly delicacy is exposed as a sham.

While at court, Macilente also brings both Puntarvolo and the fraudulent Cavalier Shift out of their affective humors when he poisons the former’s dog. Earlier in the play, Puntarvolo, combining a sort of venture capitalism with his penchant for antiquated knight errantry, had “put forth some fiue thousand pound, to be paid me, fiue for one, vpon the returne of my selfe, my wife, and my dog, from the Turkes court in Constantinople” (2.3.45-48). With the demise of his dog, Puntarvolo both loses his money and is made to realize the absurdity of his romantic fixations with chivalric questing. Macilente outs Shift when he accuses him of stealing the missing dog. The accusation sticks because of Shift’s prior lies about his career as a dangerous highwayman, lies which have insinuated him with Sogliardo, just as Bobadil’s stories insinuate him with Matthew and Stephen in Every Man in his Humor. Faced with Puntarvolo’s wrath, Shift dissembles his claims to valorous roguery and falls to his knees, pleading that he “neuer did robberie in all [his] life” (5.3.54-55). As a result of Macilente’s machinations, Saviolina, Briske, Puntarvolo, and Shift are forced to recant
their affectations, or are at least faced with the disparity between the poses they pretend to and their real places and merits.

Following the incident at court, when the characters retire to a dinner at the Mitre tavern, Macilente sets Carlo to railing at Puntarvolo, making fun of the death of his dog. Puntarvolo responds rather violently, by sealing Carlo’s lips with hot wax. In the fracas that ensues around Puntarvolo’s response, the constable seizes Briske for the debts he owes Deliro, and the other characters flee the scene, sticking Fungoso with the bill, which he, of course, is unable to pay because he has spent all his money on clothes in imitation of Briske. Ironically, at this point he is in danger of emulating his fashionable idol by following him to debtors’ prison.

Macilente’s last victims are Deliro and his wife Fallace. Like the Kitelies in *Every Man in his Humor*, Deliro and his wife represent an unbalanced match between a rich merchant and the daughter of a landowner. Mutual suspicion and jealousy is not the result of this unbalanced match, however. The unbalanced marriage in this play results in Deliro putting Fallace on a pedestal she doesn’t merit. She, in turn, lords it over her obsequious husband, continually affecting to be displeased with her situation and entertaining romantic desires towards Fastidius Briske. Macilente engineers a plot to deflate this couple’s humorous affectations when he sends Deliro off to bail Fungoso out of his dinner bill, convincing the harried man that doing his wife’s brother this service will gain her favor for once. As soon as Deliro is gone, Macilente sends Fallace off to debtor’s prison in order to aid Briske. Rejoining Deliro, Macilente helps him bail out Fungoso, who, incidentally, repents his desire to keep up with the conspicuous consumption of the London gentry. Macilente then brings Deliro to the counter where
they catch Fallace and Briske pledging their service to one another with a kiss. In this penultimate scene, Fallace’s falsehood and the ridiculous pathos of her desire for the worthless Briske are exposed, and Deliro is made to realize how silly his overweening worship of his wife has been.

The ending of this second of Jonson’s humors comedies is even more emphatic in its “untrussing” the various humorous characters of their pretensions and affectations. As noted by Barton above, this exposure and ridicule is the entire business of the comic plot. Macilente’s final soliloquy summarizes the moral of the story, just in case any in the audience happened to miss it. After each of the other characters is exposed and either made to repent or at least sufficiently ridiculed for their folly, Macilente says,

Why, here’s a change! Now is my soule at peace.

I am as emptie of all enuie now,

As they of merit to be enuied at.

My humour (like a flame) no longer lasts

Then it hath stuffe to feed it, and their folly,

Being now rak’t vp in their repentant ashes,

Affords no ampler subiect to my spleene.

I am so farre from malicing their states,

That I begin to pitty ‘hem. It grieues me

To thinke they haue a being. I could wish

They might turn wise vpon it, and be sau’d now,

So heauen were pleas’d: but let them vanish, vapors. (5.11.54-66)
When Macilente asserts that the other characters are now empty of “merit,” he uses the term to mean place or social standing. Ironically, the characters are shown to have been empty of “merit” in the sense of real worth from the comedy’s beginning. By the end of the play, though, their affectations and pretensions to place and honor are stripped away and their perceived status matches their real status. Macilente (and Carlo) have revealed their affectations of courtliness, valor, gentility, etc. to be “more then most ridiculous” in light of their actual abilities and means (Induction 114).

It might be objected that Jonson’s satire is compromised by the fact that the expositors, Carlo Buffone and Macilente, are just as vicious as the gulls that they expose. Such an objection, however, fails to take into account the literary inheritance of Buffone and Macilente from Roman and – especially – Aristophanic clever slaves, their place in the tradition of Elizabethan satire, and the particular vices that are being satirized. The classical slave characters, especially those of Aristophanes, make no claims to virtue. The deflating effect of their satiric commentary is to level the pretensions of their victims and thus expose human society at its lowest common denominator. Jonson makes use of this satiric effect especially in the characterization of Carlo, who does not represent himself as any more meritorious than anyone else in the play. Carlo, rather, seems to revel in his vice; nonetheless, his raillery effectively exposes the follies and pretensions of other characters who are no more virtuous and far less honest.

Alvin Kernan’s study of Elizabethan satire, The Cankered Muse, cites the simplistic honesty of characters like Carlo as a defining trait of the Elizabethan satirist character. However, he notes that the sometimes violent nature of this brutal honesty can make for a “satirist [that] has an unsavory character himself, and we may begin to wonder
if the author is not mocking his own creation while using him to attack others” (14-15). Kernan notes this confusion over a satirist character’s unsavoriness as specifically plaguing Macilente, among others: “Here [in the unsavory category] too we must place various satirists appearing in plays who are even more unpleasant than the characters they attack: Jonson’s Macilente. . . .” (15). Certainly, the violence of Macilente’s methods of exposure – the imprisoning of Briske, the poisoning of Puntarvolo’s dog, etc. – may seem overly harsh for a character whom the audience is supposed to applaud, but, as Kernan points out, the violence of the satirist is provoked by the extremity of the vices that he is reproving:

[M]ildness and simplicity do not suffice to make a satirist. He must not only shake his head at what he sees, he must attack it, and with vigor, if there is to be any satire. Where other men passively accept the “mortifying sight of slavery, folly and baseness” among which they are “forced to live,” or rage inwardly and ineffectively, the satirist responds with that “perfect rage and resentment” of which Swift speaks, and cries out with Juvenal,

\[Si \textit{natura negat, facit indignation versum.}\]

(Though nature says no, indination forms my verses.) (18-19)

As with Juvenal, the harsh tone of Macilente’s satire is meant to draw attention to the extremity of the vice he is castigating. And though Macilente’s harshness may strike audiences as somewhat vicious in itself, he is, like Carlo, innocent of the vices which he condemns, which are foolishness and hypocrisy. Fools in the position of gentlemen and
hypocrites posing as courtiers are the vices Macilente decries, and he is guilty of neither of these.

IV

The most consistent object of satiric treatment in all of Jonson’s comedies, but especially in these early plays, seems to be persons who pretend to a higher position of social honor or esteem than that for which they are really fit. The particular affectation that comes under fire in Jonson’s early comedies is a sort of illegitimate and fraudulent “ramping” to unmerited positions of privilege that took place in the late sixteenth century in the context of late Elizabethan social mobility. This mobility, itself, was a result of a number of economic and social factors, including population growth, urbanization, influx of capital, war with Spain, and the commercialization of the patronage system.

In this changing social landscape, traditional methods for identifying who was who and where particular persons fit in the social hierarchy were inadequate at best. Sir Thomas Smith’s description of a “gentleman” in his 1583 *De Republica Anglorum* is useful to return to here:

> Whosoever studieth the laws of the realm, who studieth in the universities, who professeth liberal sciences, and to be short, who *can live idly and without manual labor and will bear the port, charge and countenance of a gentleman, he shall be called master*, for that is the title which men give to esquires and other gentleman, *and shall be taken for a gentleman*

[emphasis added]. (39–40)

Smith’s description basically says that if one looks and acts like a gentleman, then he is will, for all intents and purposes, be held to be one. However, because of the changing
economic conditions mentioned above, by the latter decade of Elizabeth’s reign, it was increasingly easy for those who did not really possess the financial means or pedigree of gentility to nevertheless counterfeit its appearance and “be taken for a gentleman.” Jonson’s comedies argue that such affectation of an elevated and unmerited place is folly at best, and a social disease at worst, and they stridently expose and ridicule the “folly” of such pretentious social climbing, especially where accompanying personal merit is lacking.

The principal means of satiric exposure that Jonson employs in revealing the affectation that accompanies widespread social mobility is the dramatic employment of “servant” character types who are themselves mobile, though in a different way. These types, represented by Brainworm, Carlo Buffone, and Macilente, are colored from recognizable literary inheritances and a contemporary social context. The more literate members of Jonson’s audience would see the similarity between the rascally scheming of Brainworm and the machinations of the Roman slaves and would recognize the duping of the humors characters as a classic means of comic exposure. The most literate would even see the figures of the Greek satyr and Aristophanic slave in the biting jests of Carlo Buffone and Juvenalian rhetoric in the harsh satire of Macilente. As Jonson points out in the metadramatic asides throughout *Every Man Out of his Humor*, these means of comic exposure had the authority of classical precedent, which not only kept Jonson out of trouble with the censors, but also lent more weight to the satire itself.

In addition to the inheritance from literary precedent, though, Jonson’s servant characters also gain satiric potential from the contemporary social type that they represent. The unsettled character and physical mobility of servants and apprentices (and
scholars, one might argue) in late Elizabethan England makes the character type a perfect one for the satiric work that he does in Jonson’s comedies. The vocational mobility of a servant moving from place to place and job to job, surviving by wit, and at times, grift, allows for a naturally subversive type in a society that desires to define itself in terms of settled hierarchy and social contentedness. All three of Jonson’s servant types in these early plays display this unsettled and subversive character. Brainworm’s disguises and schemes are enabled by his kinetic nature. Carlo, the roving railer, moves freely from scene to scene, biting at the folly of whoever is present. Macilente insinuates himself into various companies, offering satiric commentary like Carlo, and, eventually, scheming toward others’ downfalls, like Brainworm.

What is more, the unsettled physical mobility of Jonson’s servant characters reflects the tenuous and unsettled nature of the social positions pretended to by the other characters that are the objects of their satire. In Jonson’s middle comedies, more is made of the ways in which the unstable and sometimes morally questionable mobility of the servant reflects the social mobility of the lower gentility in early Jacobean England. The next chapter will explore the development of Jonson’s use of the servant character for social satire in Volpone and The Alchemist. In these comedies, the role of the servant in a volatile and mobile society is even more subversive, and is depicted as being more directly threatening to a stable social order.

While the plotting of the servant types is less threatening – definitely less self-serving – in the early humors comedies, their role is critical in the satiric exposure of the fraud, pretense, and affectation that are unfortunate elements of a newly mobile society. In the characterization and dramatic deployment of Brainworm, Carlo Buffone, and
Macilente, Jonson successfully adapts a classically authorized literary means of comic exposure to the social milieu of Elizabethan England. The distinctly Elizabethan development of the character type is essential to Jonson’s attempt to “strip the ragged follies of the time, / Naked, as at their birth” (Every Man Out, Induction 17-18).

1 Terence’s slave characters have been noted particularly for being of this type (Duckworth 250-51).
2 In certain of his later servant characters – such as Wasp in Bartholomew Fair, and Prudence and Compass in the late plays, The New Inn and The Magnetic Lady – Jonson expands upon the tendency of the less subversive of Roman slaves towards moralizing.
3 The concept of comic communal renewal “through [festive] release to clarification” that Barber finds in the work of Shakespeare is also noted by Segal in the Roman comedy of Plautus (Barber 4). After explicitly asserting the relevance of Barber’s study to Roman New Comedy, Segal writes, “The festive feeling . . . is . . . a temporary excess which implies everyday restraint. Comedy, likewise, involves a limited license, a momentary breaking of society’s rules” (9).
4 The importance of Greene’s adaptation of the New Comic romance plot for Shakespearean comedy is asserted by the editors of the Norton Anthology of English Renaissance Drama in their introduction to the play, where they contend that the comic “romantic nonsense” of Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay is executed with “such panache as to suggest a formula for native English romantic comedy that proved invaluable to Shakespeare” (129).
5 David Riggs’s biography gives a typical critical statement of Jonson’s debt to Chapman: “The impetus for [Every Man in his Humor] was George Chapman’s Humorous Day’s Mirth” (37).
6 Segal argues that at least in the case of Plautus, Roman Comedy celebrated a vacation from traditional morality, the mos maiorum that governed everyday life. He says of Plautus’ works in Roman Laughter that “Plautine comedy reflects [a] kind of holiday attitude. . . . The rules are put aside, reality rejected, and pleasure pursued” (70). To be fair, Segal does find a certain moralizing to be present in the comedies of Terence.
7 The emphasis on satiric exposure in comedy was of course not the only current reading of the genre in Elizabethan England. As numerous studies in the critical vein of Barber’s Shakespeare’s Festive Comedy attest to, the festive element of renewal and suspension of the normal social order for a holiday made its way from the Roman to the English stage. For the purposes of analyzing Jonson’s comedies, though, the contemporary reading of the comic genre as morally satiric must be acknowledged.
8 Peck details the growth of the numbers and power of the middling gentry in the sixteenth century as follows:

Between 1541 and 1641 the English population grew from approximately 2,744,000 to about 5,092,000. Moreover, the number of those who could consider themselves gentlemen and, thereby, members of the political elite, grew even more dramatically in the sixteenth century. This enlarged political elite owned an increasingly large share of the country’s landed wealth. In the early sixteenth century, the church held perhaps 20-25 per cent and the Crown about 5 per cent of the land in England. By the late seventeenth century, because of the dissolution of the monasteries, the dissolution of the chantries, and royal land sales to finance war, those holdings had dropped to between 5-10 per cent. Whereas middling and lesser gentry owned perhaps as much as 25 per cent of the land in the fifteenth century, their share increased to 50 per cent. As a result in the early sixteenth century, in counties such as Suffolk, Rutland, and Leicestershire, only one village in five or so had a resident gentleman; by the 1680s over two-thirds had one or more gentleman residing in the village. In Somerset, it has been suggested that the number of gentle families quadrupled between 1502 and 1623. By the middle of the seventeenth century many shires had hundreds of gentry families. While many of these were parochial gentry who might not aspire seriously to court reward, the increase in the size of the bench in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries provides evidence
of growing numbers of gentry whose support the Crown needed and who brought pressure on court patronage relationships to gain access to local office and royal bounty. (31)

9 Though the phrase “conspicuous consumption” is a product of the late 19th century and not the Renaissance – the OED cites Thorstein Veblen’s 1899 Theory of the Leisure Class as the first usage of the term – the term is nonetheless useful shorthand for describing practices of spending lavishly on items purchased for the sake of appearance, such as clothes, palaces, works of art, servants, etc. by the moneyed classes in sixteenth and seventeenth century England. In importing the term backwards into late Tudor and Stuart culture, I am, moreover, following the precedent of several historians of the period, including Lawrence Stone, who not only uses the term, but gives the practices it describes central importance in as a cause of the decline of the aristocracy in this period, writing, “At this period [late sixteenth-early seventeenth centuries] conspicuous consumption was a cause of family decay second only to biological failure” (86). R. Malcom Smuts includes “conspicuous consumption” in a list of cultural phenomena that defined Stuart court culture (1).

10 In this analysis, I use the 1616 folio version of the play as its London setting makes it more directly indicative of the contemporary social satire in Jonson’s early comedies. Though the date of the revision is most often considered to be contemporaneous with Jonson’s middle comedies, the revisions to the plot and character type are slight enough that the structure of the play is essentially the same as in the 1604 quarto version (first acted in 1598). The effect of most of the revisions, as Ralph Alan Cohen cogently argues in “The Importance of Setting in the Revision of Every Man in his Humour” is to heighten the local flavor of the satire of London that is already present in the quarto version.

11 Pseudolus, in the play that bears his name, for example, updates the audience as to the progress of his machinations in duping his master in a soliloquy that contains much of the same elements as Brainworm’s, right down to the military metaphor.

Pro Iuppiter, ut mihi, quidquid ago, lepide omnia prospere evenunt: neque quod dubetem neque quod timeam, meo in pectore conditumst consilium.
. . . nam ego in meo pectore prius ita paravi copias, duplicis triplus dolos perfidies, ut, ubiqiumque hostibus congrediar. . . facile ut vincam, facile ut spoliem meos perduellis meis perfidies. (575-583)

(By Jupiter! How charmingly, how blissfully, all my undertakings do turn out for me! Nothing to doubt, nothing to fear, with the scheme now stored in my chest! . . . Ah, and I, the way I have my troops already marshaled in my mind, in double, triple, line of wile and guile, let me meet the enemy where’er I may, I . . . shall easily master, easily despoil, my foemen with my flimflam.)

Much like Brainworm exposits his plans, Pseudolus goes on to detail how he means to defraud the pimp Ballio of the prostitute Phoenicium, whom Pseudolus’ young master Calidorus wants for his own.

12 Alvin Kernan’s The Cankered Muse argues that in Jonson’s “Comicall-Satyres,” the formal satirist of Elizabethan satire is brought onto the stage as a dramatic character. Kernan’s text fully analyses the relation between the satiric dialogue of Jonson’s “satirist” characters and the poetics of Elizabethan satire.

13 Though these characters are not servants, per se, I retain the moniker in describing the character type to preserve the unity of the type in Jonsonian comedy. Though the characters in this play are not serving men, the vast majority of the characters of this type under study in this dissertation, are, in fact, servants. Moreover, the term, “servant” recalls the Jonsonian character type’s origins in a literary inheritance from the clever slaves of classical comedy.

14 “Nobility” in this discussion denotes not just the peerage, but any rank of gentleman. This usage is not meant to erase the real social distinction between aristocrats and members of the lower gentility, the distinction that still holds between the two houses of English parliament. However, as shown in Harrison’s text, the most pertinent social division in Elizabethan England is the division between the common folk and the gentility, wherein “gentility” denotes the aristocracy as well (94). Stone also argues for the importance of this social boundary as “basic” to Elizabethan England (27). Moreover, the terms “nobility” and “gentility” were often used interchangeably in contemporary discussions of the subject, like Giovanni Battista Nenna’s A Discourse Whether a Noble Man by Birth or a Gentleman by Desert is Greater in Nobilitie (1600). In Richard Jones’s 1590 The Booke of Honor and Armes in fact, the terms are asserted to
be synonymous: “Whosoeuer is borne noble (vnder which word is comprised all sorts of nobilitie and gentilitie) is equal to any other Gentleman of private condition” (36).

15 A more detailed account of Jonson’s non-dramatic laudatory verse is taken up in the next chapter.

16 Thus, these essays were undoubtedly familiar to Jonson.

17 The dog is an unfortunate innocent victim in this plot device, and the satiric ploy that Jonson uses here seems somewhat too harsh to modern audiences, who see find more fault in Macilente for killing the dog than in Puntarvolo for ridiculously putting money out at interest on the safe return of his dog. In order to see the satire in this device as Jonson’s audience would have seen it, it is helpful to remember that Jonson’s contemporaries regularly took in animal blood sports for light entertainment that would be punished as felonies in twenty-first century America.
Corrupt Servants: The Servant as a Subversive Threat to Social Order

In the Prologue to *Volpone*, Ben Jonson characteristically invokes the neoclassical Horatian maxim of *dulce et utile* in defense of the corrective and satirical nature of his comedy. He writes regarding his role as a comic poet that his “true scope, if you would know it, / In all his *poemes*, stil, hath been this measure, / To mixe profit, with your pleasure” (6-8). The same invocation of the satirically corrective nature of comedy is found in the Prologue to *The Alchemist*, where Jonson writes,

. . . Though this pen

Did neuer aime to grieve, but better men;

How e’er the age, he liues in, doth endure

The vices that shee breeds, aboue their cure.

But, when the wholesome remedies are sweet,

And, in their working, gaine, and profit meet,

He hopes to find no spirit so much diseas’d,

But will, with such correctiues, be pleas’d. (11-18)

In *Volpone’s* dedicatory epistle to the “most noble and most eqvall sisters,” Oxford and Cambridge, Jonson further specifies the dramaturgical method by which he attempts to bring about the “correctiues” announced in these prologues (2.49). He explains that he has “labour’d, for [the audience’s] instruction, and amendment, to reduce, not onely the ancient formes, but manners of the scene, the easinesse, the propriety, the innocence, and last the doctrine, which is the principall end of poesie, to informe men, in the best reason of liuing” (105-109). These prefatory statements announce that these comedies, like the early humors comedies discussed in the previous chapter, are designed according to
classical dramaturgical methods, which Renaissance neoclassical dramatic theories identify as satirically critiquing social “vices,” “errors,” and “follies.” Moreover, Jonson’s statement that he is employing not only the “doctrine” of “ancient” comedy – to “informe men, in the best reason of liuing” – but the “formes” and “manners of scene” indicate that these comedies will, like the early humors comedies, adapt the dramaturgical methods of classical comedy to the purpose of exposing and ridiculing contemporary ills.

In analyzing Jonson’s revision of classical comic norms in the early humors comedies, the previous chapter noted that the essential satiric element in the classical comic plot is supplied by the mischievous schemes of the clever slaves, in which they dupe agelast characters and play upon their besetting vices and follies. This duping, according to neoclassical readings of classical comedies, exposes the moral shortcomings of the senes: their greed, pride, lust, etc. The previous chapter has attempted to demonstrate that Jonson’s revision of the clever slave character type and his scheming nature is equally essential to the program of satiric exposure within his own comedies. In Jonson’s revision, the clever slave character type is transformed into an unsettled and volatile, though equally clever, English servant figure whose unstable disposition mirrors the instability inherent to late Elizabethan social mobility. Moreover, their clever scheming exposes the fraud and pretension of gulls who would take advantage of the muddled hierarchy created by the social instability to pretend to an elevated rank that they either do not, in fact, occupy, or do not merit. In a sense, the gulling schemes of Jonson’s servants in the early comedies result in a particular satiric critique of the commercialized patronage system in late sixteenth century England as a social context that enables the vices of poseurs and frauds. For example, while the foppery of a
Fastidious Briske or the idiocy of a Stephen might be vices particular to their characters, their pretensions to elevated social rank on the basis of either a wardrobe purchased on credit or inherited land are enabled, or so the plays seem to indicate, by the blurring of the traditional line between the gentry and the citizenry/yeomanry that took place in the latter decades of Elizabeth’s reign.

The middle comedies analyzed in this chapter, *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*, as well as *Eastward Ho!*, on which Jonson collaborated with George Chapman and John Marston, in keeping with the neoclassical intentions that Jonson outlines for them in the prefatory statements cited above, focus their plots on the satiric exposure of the “vices” of these plays’ gulls. As in the early humors comedies, the role of the servant characters, dramaturgical heirs of the classical clever slaves, are central to the satiric exposure in these plays. The clever machinations of Mosca, Face, and Francis Quicksilver are among the primary means by which the greedy appetites and fraudulent poses of the unmeritorious gentility and its would-be imitators in these comedies – characters like Corvino, Epicure Mammon, and Gertrude Touchstone – are exposed as risible and vicious. Also as in the early humors comedies, the blurring of the line between gentry and non-gentry that characterized early seventeenth century English social mobility forms the enabling context for the vices of the gulls in these plays.

In these plays, though, the social aspirations and pretensions of the dupes reach a higher pitch commensurate with the increased commercialization of patronage and social mobility of Jacobean England. As the pretensions and appetites of the gulls in these middle comedies are ratcheted up, so the devious scheming of the servant characters
becomes bolder, more self-serving, and thus more sinister in its critique of the immorality appertaining to the commercialization of patronage and cultural social mobility.

I

Historians of the Jacobean era have noted the sharp increase in the granting of arms that followed James’s ascension to the throne, and the necessarily ensuing denigration of the prestige of the lower orders of gentility. Lawrence Stone describes the contrast between Elizabeth’s stinginess in granting knighthoods and James’s open-handed nature, especially as it manifested itself immediately following his being made king: “With the accession of King James on 24 March 1603, royal parsimony was suddenly replaced by the most reckless prodigality: in the first four months of the reign, he dubbed no fewer than 906 knights” (41). In the early years of James’s reign, the line that had marked the English gentry from the non-gentry, a line that had been considerably blurred in the latter years of Elizabeth’s reign, was blurred even further. Stone describes the repercussions of the sharp increase in knighthoods for the cultural perception of the gentry as decidedly negative. He argues that “the careless distribution of knighthoods by King James – forty-six at a go before breakfast at Belvoir on his way south – could only bring the order into contempt” (41).

The “contempt” that was felt by many quarters in England for the newly elevated gentry was likely exacerbated by the fact that, largely because of the Jacobean court’s constant need for money to finance its lavish expenditures, many of the titles and honors granted in these years were essentially purchased by those wealthy enough to buy their new rank. Stone describes the process by which titles of honor were commoditized as follows:
Knighthood was the first dignity which the Crown openly allowed to be sold, not by the King himself but by deserving courtiers and servants. The causes of this development are clear enough. Fierce pressure from below from a squirearchy too long starved of titles, a financial stringency that precluded the distribution of direct cash gifts to servants and followers, a laudable desire to please both courtiers and clients, the fact that offices, monopolies, and favours were already being granted to courtiers for resale, all led the easy-going James to succumb to temptation and make knighthood a saleable commodity. (42-43)

Linda Levy Peck notes these same factors as leading to the sale of offices under James and notes a similar loss of prestige for those who were raised by Jacobean patronage:

The particular problem that the Jacobean court faced was that the Crown, under the several pressures of clamoring suitors, increased expenses, and decreased parliamentary funding, made explicit the [market] basis of its allocation of resources. As a result, they faced the political cost of the loss of the “symbolic capital” that royal bounty represented. (38)

As a result of this commoditization, personal wealth, practically speaking, became increasingly important relative to other criteria considered requisite for high social rank in Jacobean England, such as bloodlines and personal virtue, this in spite of a proliferation of rhetoric by political theorists like John Selden, in *Tiles of Honor*, and King James himself, in *Basilikon Doron*, that exalted virtue and blood specifically as the pre-eminent qualifications for attaining the rank of gentleman. Theodora Jankowski, in an article entitled, “Class Categorization, Capitalism, and the Problem of ‘Gentle’
Identity in *The Royall King and the Loyall Subject* and *Eastward Ho!*,” describes the cultural ambivalence regarding gentlemen who may have possessed their arms through purchase. Her study notes the conservative reaction by writers in the vein of Selden and James who stress traditional criteria for receiving honors, i.e. blood and virtue, as more legitimate than the nascent criterion of possessing great personal wealth. Of course, wealth had been a recognized trait of the gentility for some time, but, as Jankowski notes, its rise as an important consideration in the raising of new gentility sparked suspicion of the worthiness of new gentry who had for all intents and purposes purchased their honors. “Such possession [of rank by commercial means],” Jankowski writes, “raises the possibility that the lowest rank of the gentry was, to some degree at least, permeable, penetrable, and purchasable. Fears of entry by men whose birth made them ‘unqualified’ for such rank – though their talents and wealth may have made them ‘overqualified’ – might have contributed to the various definitions of nobility/gentility as residing in birth and/or behavior” (155).

If the sale of offices weren’t enough to create doubt regarding the qualifications of newly-raised gentlemen, the corruption that accompanied this commercialization of patronage implied that honors possessed by new gentlemen may not have even been ethically or legally purchased. Peck cites James’s naval administration, headed by Sir Robert Mansell and Sir John Trevor, “courtiers who viewed their offices as market opportunities,” as a typical example of the corrupt administration of patronage during this time (113). Among their corrupt practices, these administrators “used their patronage and power to create and sell new offices, some of them unnecessary” in order to fill their own coffers (112). Peck implies that this sort of corruption within the early Jacobean
patronage system was the rule rather than the exception. In the corrupt patronage system under James, the rank of gentleman or its equivalent could apparently be gained by any with sufficient means to buy it, regardless of how those means may have been acquired.

The waning of respect for the gentleman class that accompanied its perception as dangerously permeable was exacerbated by the equally increasing identification of gentleman-like behavior with the luxurious living and immoderate spending habits of the Jacobean court. R. Malcom Smuts’ book, Court Culture and the Origins of a Royalist Tradition in Early Stuart England, notes the extravagance of the Jacobean court relative to its Elizabethan counterpart, an extravagance brought about, in part, by an increase in international trade:

Products that had been rare luxuries in the 1580s – including silk stockings, elaborate lace collars, Venetian glasses, watches, and coaches – became relatively common by the early seventeenth century. . . . For the gentry, at least, London was already the home of a consumer society boasting a quantity and a variety of goods which early generations could not have imagined. (58)

The “conspicuous consumption,” as Smuts terms it, of London gentility lent credence to criticism from contemporaries that James’s court had become “corrupt and extravagant” (Smuts 1, 4). As the gentleman class in Jacobean England came more and more to be identified with habits of extravagant spending and luxury, would-be courtiers wishing to affect a gentleman-like pose increasingly imitated their betters’ practices of excessive spending and consuming.
These trends in early Jacobean England form the context for the satiric critique in Jonson’s middle comedies of the pretentious greed, hypocrisy and affectation, and corruption that are portrayed as plaguing socially mobile English culture. Though the butts of satire in Jonson’s early Jacobean comedies are guilty of largely the same vices as those of the early humors comedies, i.e. fraudulent affectation and social aspirations beyond that for which their virtues and abilities make them fit, the gulls in these plays seem more single-mindedly focused in their drive to obtain the newly fashionable means of securing rank and power, which is, in these plays, money. In their affectation of poses of gentility, the butts of satire in Jonson’s middle comedies reflect the contemporary ties between wealth and rank in their insatiable greed for hoarding riches. Their appetite for wealth is matched only by their desire for the material goods to spend it on, and here again, they comprise a critique of the liberal spending Jacobean gentry. In their ostentation, hedonist characters like Epicure Mammon and Sir Politic Would-Be are satiric parodies of the extravagant consumption with which James’s court was often charged.

The satire of these gulls reflects the dubious reputation of the gentility in early seventeenth century England. Neither those who possess gentility nor those who are actively pursuing the means to achieve gentility in these plays have any of the feudal “virtues” of gentlemen: i.e. loyalty to king and country, meritorious service to the state, care for constituents, concern for public justice, etc. To a man – or woman as the case may be – all of the characters in these plays who aspire to gentility are chiefly concerned with getting and spending; they seek only to enjoy the external honors and trappings of social rank.
The servant characters also undergo a change in the way they are characterized in these plays. Their duping of the gulls still functions as the primary means of satiric exposure in the comedies, but the ways in which their schemes expose the affectation of the gulls, again, reflects a critical indictment of the importance of personal wealth for achieving rank at this time. In the early humors comedies, it was sufficient for Brainworm and Macilente to make the foolishness of would-be gentleman like Stephen and Sogliardo evident to the audience. The schemes of Mosca and Face not only expose the gulls in *Volpone* and *The Alchemist* as unmeritorious fools, but also separate them from the one means they recognize as a criterion for their rank: their money. Moreover, the servant characters in these comedies are not only interested in schemes that aid their masters and expose the folly of the dupes, as their early humors comedy predecessors are. Keenly aware of the highly permeable boundary separating gentility from non-gentility, and also aware of the power of wealth as a means of acquiring elevated rank, the servant and apprentice characters in these comedies seek to effect their own social advancement through their various duping schemes. In this aspect of their characterization, the identification of Jonson’s servant characters with the clever slaves of classical comedy is of some particular importance.

The perception of serving men in late sixteenth century England as mercenary, parasitic, and possibly larcenous has been detailed in the previous chapter, and William Harrison’s criticisms of the way that serving men contributed to the ruin of their young masters have been noted in particular. A similarly questionable moral character is also ascribed to clever slaves of Roman comedy in sixteenth century literary criticism. In defending the morality of comedy as a genre on the grounds that it provides many
negative object lessons, illustrations of the “filthiness of evil,” from which the audience can learn virtue by seeing its opposite, Sir Philip Sidney in *An Apology for Poetry*, mentions “crafty Dauus,” the archetypal slave from Terence, as one of the character types who illustrates a particular vice, in this case, “craft” (177). According to Sidney, the duping schemes of the clever slaves of Roman New Comedy, while they serve a virtuous purpose in revealing the vices of other characters, are nonetheless, themselves, vicious. Thomas Lodge seems to express the same view in his *Defence of Poetry*. Lodge, also listing a series of vicious natures that an audience can learn to identify in Roman comedy, asks, “Wyl you learne to knowe a parasite? Looke vpon [Terence’s] Dauus” (80). Both Sidney and Lodge impugn the morals of clever slaves undoubtedly because of the shifty ways in which their schemes dupe the *senes* and agelasts out of their fortunes in Roman comedies. Lodge’s terming of Terence’s slave character as a “parasite,” a typical moniker for the clever slave in Renaissance criticism,\(^1\) recalls Harrison’s description of English serving men as parasites who “insinuate themselves with young gentlemen and noblemen newly come to their lands” (119). Just as a relatively common cultural perception of servants and apprentices labeled them as being of questionable morals and prone to thievery, the prevalent literary conception of the clever slave type from ancient comedy identified him as crafty, parasitic, and borderline criminal.

As noted in the last chapter, Jonson’s servant/apprentice characters are drawn from these two rascally sorts of character types: the stereotypical unsettled and subversive English servant and the literary clever slave of classical comedy. In light of the contemporary perceptions of the two types that have just been noted, Jonson’s servant characters in these plays cannot but be vividly colored as somewhat vicious in their own
right. When the “vices” of these characters are used wholly in the service of satiric exposure, as is Brainworm’s deception in *Every Man in his Humor*, their immorality can be pardoned in favor of the “wit” they display in revealing the follies of the gulls. In comedies such as *Volpone*, *Eastward Ho!* and *The Alchemist*, however, where the deceptive and crafty schemes of the servant characters ultimately serve the purpose of their own enrichment and consequent social advancement, the vicious element of their machinations acquires a more sinister hue. The deception of the servant becomes a means whereby he parasitically cons his victims of their wealth in order to enrich and advance himself. The servant characters’ nearly successful rising to honorific rank by parasitic means in these middle comedies implies an additional and pointed critique of the mobile social hierarchy and corrupt patronage system that would nearly allow them to enter the upper ranks of society by fraudulent means.

The attempts to amass wealth and enter the ranks of the gentry on the parts of Francis Quicksilver, Mosca, and Face form a critique of Jacobean social mobility on two counts. First, because of the literary and cultural stereotypes that inform their characterization, their threat to enter the ranks of the gentility implicitly critiques the moral integrity of the gatekeeping standards of the gentleman class. Their near successes allege that one who possesses sufficient means can be a gentleman in Jacobean society regardless of moral character or birth and no matter how ill-gotten his means are. Second, the parasitic and deceptive methods that the servants use to get wealth are uncomfortably close to the techniques that those among the gentry use to maintain their own wealth and status as gentlemen. The deceptive scheming of the parasites is an invectively satiric mirror reflecting the corruption of Jacobean court patronage.
A further critique of Jacobean court society is made by the fraudulent schemes of the servant characters in these plays, though it has little to do with their threat to infiltrate that society. The way in which the servants in these plays are able to defraud the aspiring gentlemen and gentlewomen of their means is by the promise of greater luxuries and riches, of the fruits of aristocratic conspicuous consumption: Gertrude Touchstone signs away her landed estate for a coach to ride in and a promise of a castle that turns out to not even exist; Corvino, Corbaccio, and Voltore bring lavish gift after lavish gift to Volpone at Mosca’s insinuations that they will have his entire estate after his death; and Epicure Mammon, perhaps the greatest would-be consumer in Jonsonian comedy, loses himself – and his goods – in dreams of the absurdly extravagant luxuries he will enjoy once he has the philosopher’s stone. The prospects of joining in the “gentlemanly” habit of absurdly extravagant consumption renders the gulls in these comedies prey for the fraudulent schemes of clever servants like Face and Mosca.

As with the early humors comedies, the middle comedies use the schemes and machinations of clever servant characters to expose the follies and vices of a socially mobile culture. In these comedies though, the emphases on personal wealth as a criterion for advancement, courtly conspicuous consumption, and the corruption of the patronage system as objects of satiric criticism are heightened. As a result, the satire of a mobile and corrupted social hierarchy is amplified.

II

Theodora Jankowski’s reading of *Eastward Ho!* situates the play in the context of late sixteenth and early seventeenth debates concerning the most legitimate grounds for determining “true” nature of gentility, debates of the type dramatized by Giovanni Batista
Nenna’s *A Discourse Whether a Noble Man by Birth or a Gentleman by Desert is Greater in Nobilitie*, referenced in the previous chapter. As Nenna’s dialogue illustrates, the debate generally centered on three major criteria which were considered as requisite for elevated social rank: birth, personal wealth, and personal virtue. Stone describes the debate over the relative importance of these criteria and how it relates to what was actually taking place in Jacobean society in the context of describing the contemporary obsession with genealogy on the part of the gentility:

One of the paradoxes of the age was that this excessive adulation of ancient lineage took place at precisely the time when political theorists were laying increasing emphasis upon virtue, education, and the capacity to serve the State as the supreme test of and justification for a leisured class living off the labours of others. But the contemporary obsession with genealogy and the direct association of gentility with a private income prove that birth and wealth still ranked higher than virtue, education, or ability as indicators of status. (17-18)

Jankowski also notes this time period as a transitional one in defining gentility, in which “feudal” conceptions of social class began to give way to “mercantile” ones (162). According to Jankowski, feudal criteria for armigerous status rested on birth, deeds, or, preferably, a combination of the two. Jankowski cites Lawrence Humfrey’s 1563 text, *The Nobles or of Nobilitye*, which classifies nobility according to three categories, as an example of the feudal concept of nobility. Humfrey’s three categories are essentially as follows: nobility conferred through noble birth; nobility gotten not by birth, but by noble deeds; and nobility conferred through noble birth and confirmed by subsequent noble
deeds (Jankowski 153). Jankowski notes, “Ideally, of course, those of noble birth were to behave nobly and perform these noble actions for the honor of their family, their overlord, and their realm” (153). In other words, according to feudal concepts of nobility, a nobleman by birth should confirm his nobility through noble behavior. Mercantile conceptions of social class, on the contrary, tended to tie degrees of rank to degrees of wealth; power in the emergent marketplace was, according to these conceptions, directly linked to social and political power. This linkage is what Stone describes when he notes “the direct association of gentility with a private income” (18). Gentility, thus, in practice, came increasingly to depend upon some combination of adequate wealth and birth, with, as will be shown in more detail below, the former often being able to compensate for deficiency in the latter. In the political ideal of gentility that Stone and Jankowski describe, on the other hand, birth and personal virtue are emphasized as the requisite qualities of a gentleman, with the latter confirming the legitimacy of the former.

Implicit in what Jankowski calls the feudal concept of nobility is the assumption that the virtuous qualities of nobility are passed down from noble fathers to their sons and ancestors in patrilineal succession. Selden provides an exemplary statement of this line of thought in the preface to Titles of Honour, where he writes regarding a Prince’s normative practice of conferring inherited nobility on an heir,

The Prince, as it were, suppose[es] that if the Father be Noble, the issue will resemble him. Which the Persians were confident on, where the Queen was neuer so much as suspected of inc[o]tinence, because the King
was always esteemd of so truly royall parts, that the Nature of hir issue by another, would discouer if shee had chang’d the Father. (b3.verso)

In this formulation of nobility as passed through the bloodlines from father to son, nobility itself takes on a determinative quality wherein the noble blood necessarily produces the virtues associated with the noble father in his heir. As Selden notes, the Persians held this assumption so firmly that they determined that a wicked heir, of necessity, must be illegitimate, and not the biological son of the royal father. Jonathan Goldberg notes in *James I and the Politics of Literature* that James relied on this assumption of the nobility of blood in legitimating the Stuart claim to the English throne as well as his absolutist politics: “Unlike his Tudor predecessor, James located his power in a royal line that proceeded from him; for him, as for many European absolutists, legitimacy was asserted in genealogy” (85). Indeed, James alludes to the English throne being his by right of bloodlines in the preface to the reader for his *Basilikon Doron*, written, of course, before he was in actual possession of the English throne. In a rhetorical gesture that actually downplays his ambitions for England while at the same time asserting his right thereto, James refuses to comment on the nation’s “diseases,” saying, “I know, indeede, no Kingdome lackes her owne diseases, and likewayes *what interest I have in the prosperitie of that state* [England]: for although I would be silent, *my blood and discent doth sufficiently proclaime it* [emphasis added]” (c3). The statement implies that James’s descent from Henry VIII is responsible not only for his right to the throne, but also for a natural interest in the prosperity of the nation. The royal qualities of the King of England pass to him through the line of royal blood, as it were.
Basilikon Doron, written as an instructive letter to James’s eldest son and presumptive heir, Prince Henry, implicitly stresses the importance of bloodlines for noble legitimacy; its whole premise is built on the assumption of a patrilineal succession of nobility, which stresses the legitimacy of the Stuart line. However, the treatise places an even heavier stress on the instruction that it gives to the young prince regarding how to rule as a virtuous king than it does on his right of blood, thus also implying the importance of “noble” behavior in confirming the legitimacy of noble blood. The importance of virtuous behavior in confirming the nobility of the line is so ostensibly important to James, in fact, that in the epistle to the 1603 printed version of Basilikon Doron, he goes so far as to say, “For I protest before the great God, I had rather not bee a father, and childless, then be a Father of wicked children” (b2). In this statement James seems to echo the sentiment found in Nenna’s dialogue that the personal virtue of the heirs is even more important than their ancestry in determining their nobility.

In Nenna’s dialogue, Fabricio, the gentleman who argues for his nobility based upon his virtue, answers his opponent Possidonio’s claim that his nobility is superior because of the nobility of his ancestors by arguing

but I hearde no word that they [the noble ancestors] themselves were descended of any noble stocke (whereby if you doe well weigh the matter) you may perceiue the uncertainty of his speech: forsomuch as he did then affirme, the nobility of his auncestors to consist, not in bloud as hee said, but in actes of magnanimitie, and in vertue, which is easie to be credited, as that which proceedeth from the vertues of the mind. . . . But forsomuch as their nobilitie did not consist in bloud, but in the vertues of the minde,
therefore their glorious worthinesse and lawdable renownme is not dead, 
nor will euer be extinguished in their posterity. . . . We ought not then to 
consider in true Nobilitie, as thou sayst, eyther the predecessors or 
successors, but only the virtue of man. (30-31)

Fabricio’s argument, which wins the day at the end of the dialogue, is that regardless of 
blood, true nobility is determined according to evidence of virtue; he argues that each 
generation is responsible for maintaining its own noble honor by cultivating “vertues of 
the mind.” In further support of his argument, he cites a litany of historical precedents 
drawn from both persons of base lineage who have risen to nobility through their virtuous 
deeds and persons of noble lineage who have forfeited their honor of birthright by their 
vicious behavior. Selden’s Titles of Honor also argues for the importance of “merit” for 
attaining the honor of nobility, both on the part of those who by their merit are first raised 
to the honor and subsequently on the part of the heirs whose merits must continue to 
deserve the title. “So that,” Selden argues, “Merit by Qualitie, both in the first acquiring 
the Princes fauor, and in his issue, are the true causes of Nobilitie, as if the originall 
collation of the Dignitie were so made, that the first deseruing, and his begotten heires, 
such only as were deseruing, should enjoy it [emphasis added]” (b4.verso). The 
emphasis on personal virtue and merit in treatises like Selden’s and Nenna’s – and even 
in Basilikon Doron – qualifies the concept of bloodlines as the sole criterion for 
deserving the honor of rank and title in the feudal concept of nobility that these treatises 
espouse.

To assert, though, that James’s repeated exhortations to virtue in Basilikon Doron 
amount to evidence of the monarch’s belief that personal virtue trumps the birthright of
blood would probably be to attach too much importance to the rhetoric of virtue in the document, especially in light of James’s life-long insistence on his royal prerogative in spite of criticisms leveled by Puritan and parliamentary detractors of the un-virtuous quality of his prodigal court. Though in the opening statement, James asserts, “As he cannot bee thought worthie to rule and command others, that cannot rule and Dantone his owne proper affections and unreasonable appetites, so can he not be thought worthie to governe a Christian People knowing and fearing God, that in his own person and heart, feareth not and loveth not the Divine Majestie,” he did not seem to feel himself answerable during his own reign to his subjects regarding his own “appetites” (1).

What is perhaps, for our purposes, more important in Basilikon Doron than James’s insistence on the necessity for virtue in the king himself is the repeated injunctions to his son to dispense the honors of patronage according to the deserving virtue of the recipients. He advises his son, “Choose then for all these offices [of state], men of knowne wisdome, honestie, and good conscience; well practiced in the points of the crafte, that ye ordaine them for” (51). Further on, he warns against rewarding persons for reasons other than merit: “And therefore be carefull to preferre none, as ye will be answerable to God, but onely for their worthinesse” (51). This injunction regarding patronage is a theme repeated throughout the treatise. In encouraging Henry to be liberal in giving to his subjects, James instructs the prince, “Use true liberalitie in rewarding the good, and bestowing frankly for your honour and weale: but with that proportionall discretion, that every man may be served according to his measure: wherein respect must bee had to his ranke, deserts, and necessitie” (73). Finally, James closes his treatise by repeating his advice in the context of dispensing justice, telling Henry to take “pleasure,
not onely to rewarde, but to advance the good; which is the chiefe point of a Kings
glorie. . . . And above all, let the measure of your love to every one, be according to the
measure of his virtue; letting your favour be no longer tyed to any, then the continuance
of his virtuous disposition shall deserve” (100-101).

The model of conferring honors that James advocates in Basilikon Doron is, thus,
really the same one that Selden urges as a model in Titles of Honor, wherein nobility is
either conferred by the prince upon a person as a reward for merit, or is inherited and
maintained by the heir who continues by his virtuous merit to deserve the honor. Of
course, the financial insolvency of James’s court made this ideal of patronage a practical
impossibility for the early Stuart court, and, as historians like Stone and Peck
demonstrate, the honors granted by James’s court were in reality granted most often to
those whose primary qualification for nobility was that new and emergent qualification
conspicuously absent from the qualifications discussed by Selden, James, and Lawrence
Humfrey. That qualification was, of course, wealth.

Though not mentioned in Humfrey’s or Selden’s catalogs of criteria for nobility,
“riches” is often mentioned in Nenna’s dialogue. Possidonio, he whose arguments for his
more legitimate and “true” nobility are found inferior to Fabricio’s argument for virtue,
asserts that in addition to superior ancestry, he has the upper hand over Fabricio in terms
of his greater riches. Because riches are necessary for the maintenance of a great house,
for the liberality that is expected of a nobleman, and for keeping up the lavish appearance
of nobility, Possidonio argues, all must acknowledge “that riches necessarily are the
cause of all ornament of nobilitie” (22). Riches are so intimately tied to nobility, in fact,
Possidonio says, that anyone lacking other virtues yet having sufficient riches can be
noble, whereas he who lacks riches, though he be noble in other matters, cannot attain to nobility at all. He argues,

> Which thing you may the better consider, by that which experience teacheth, seeing that no man can mount vp to anie degree of vertue, or nobilitie, but riches must open the gap, and make the way. Who will deny, but that it had been impossible for so manie noble men and knights, as we daily see, to haue made any entry to vertu & nobility, but by their riches, much lesse to haue euer come to [the] end, or midst thereof? (24)

Possidonio’s argument goes so far as to equate riches with virtue and nobility. Fabricio debunks his argument by demonstrating that riches are more often the cause of vice than virtue and that, moreover, the holding of riches is entirely dependent upon the whim of fortune (40, 42). He concludes, “I say then, that it is neither the stately palaces, nor pleasant gardens, nor fertill fields, nor well fashioned apparel, nor aboundance of golde or siluer, as thinges which haue no stabilitie in them, which doe make a man Noble, but vertue which shineth in the minde” (42).

Fabricio’s argument, as has been shown, presents an ideal of nobility amply endorsed by writers like Humfrey, Selden, and James, himself, but the picture of early Stuart patronage painted by historians like Stone and Peck is one that operates more according to the commercial logic of Possidonio’s arguments than according to Fabricio’s ideals. The society that results from this kind of commercialized patronage, one that has little concern for the pedigree of blood and even less for the merit of the honored recipient, is the object of rather harsh satire in Jonson’s middle comedies, which
scathingly expose and ridicule the dangers and injustices of ignoring the merit of those seeking honors.

Jonson’s affinity for the feudal ideal of nobility, in which noble birth is confirmed by noble deeds, can be seen in his epigrams written in praise of various noble personages of early seventeenth century England. A recurring trope in these poems is the insistence that the virtuous deeds of the object of praise confirm his or her nobility more surely than anything else is capable of doing. Epigram LXVII, “To Thomas Earle of Suffolke,” is a case in point. Jonson writes,

Since men haue left to doe praise-worthy things,
Most think all praises flatteries. But truth brings
That sound, and that authoritie with her name,
As, to be rais’d by her, is onely fame.
Stand high, then, HOWARD, high in the eyes of men,
High in thy bloud, thy place, but highest then,
When, in mens wishes, so thy vertues wrought,
As all thy honors were by them first sought:
And thou design’d to be the same thou art,
Before thou wert it in each good mans heart. (1-10)

Jonson lauds Howard as an exemplar of feudal nobility. The Earl’s meritorious virtues confirm his aristocratic birth. As will be seen below, the Earl’s later behavior as a notoriously corrupt patron during his tenure as Lord Treasurer in the second decade of James’s reign would give something the lie to Jonson’s praises. His later behavior aside,
though, Jonson’s praise at the time of this epigram represents a current ideal of nobility where birth and virtue legitimate rank.

The Earl of Suffolk, as praised in Jonson’s epigram, is a model of the kind of nobility defined by Selden and Nenna. His noble honor is founded first on his “bloud” but even more so upon his “vertues.” His wealth is not even considered worthy of mention. As such an exemplar, Howard stands as a virtuous exception to the concept of nobility defined by wealth that was gaining acceptance as an inherent trait of nobility and, therefore, eventually sufficient grounds for being raised to the honor in seventeenth century England. Jankowski cites Henry Pecham’s 1627 treatise on nobility, *The Compleat Gentleman*, which complains of the impropriety of bestowing noble rank upon a recipient because of his wealth. Pecham writes,

> Nobilitie then . . . is nothing else then a certaine eminency, or notice taken of someone aboue the rest, for some notable act performed, be it good or ill; . . . Neither must we Honor or esteeme those ennobled, or made Gentle in blood, who by mechanick and base meanes, haue raked vp a masse of wealth, or because they follow some great man, . . . since Nobility hangeth not vpon the aiery esteeme of vulgar opinion, but is indeed of itself essentiall and absolute. . . . whether Poverty impeacheth or staineth Nobilitie. I answere, Riches are an ornament, not the cause of Nobilitie; . . . Beside, Nobilitie stirreth up emulation in great Spirits, not onely of equaling others, but excelling them. (qtd in Jankowski 154)

Jankowski draws attention to two important developments in Pecham’s discussion of nobility: the conflation of the concepts of “gentility” and “nobility” and the mention
of “Riches” as a criterion used by the Jacobean court for determining social rank. She comments on Peacham’s complaint as follows:

Here we begin to see an elision between the terms nobility and gentry.

Those of noble birth are members of the gentry, but earlier authors usually made a distinction between nobility and gentry within the social hierarchy, using nobility of birth to refer primarily to those born with titles. But Peacham also raises the question of money, which had not been previously considered. For this author, “Riches” bear no relationship to nobility.

This divorcing of income or personal substance from nobility suggests that at this time titles could be, or were being purchased. (154)

The two developments that Jankowski notes are undoubtedly interrelated. As noted in the previous chapter, the elision of the terms “nobility” and “gentility” in Peacham’s text actually reflects that the sharpest dividing line in Renaissance English social structure remained that between gentlemen and non-gentlemen; it also follows the precedent of earlier writers like Nenna’s translator, Sir William Jones, and Richard Jones in using the terms interchangeably. The elision of these terms does not, of course, erase the distinction between the gentry and the proper aristocracy in England. It does, however, implicitly demonstrate that, especially in the feudal concept of patronage, the same logic of promotion by blood and virtue applies to titles of gentility as well as to the higher titles of nobility. In Elizabeth’s reign and early in James’s reign, of course, a sharp distinction was drawn between gentry and nobility with regards to promotion: that being that titles of aristocracy were not commercialized as arms of gentility were. That distinction was compromised during James’s administration, though. Stone notes an early instance of the
essential “sale” of a peerage in James’s reign: “The first clear evidence of the open sale of a title by James comes in 1605, when Arabella Stuart was given a patent for a peerage with a blank for the name to be filled in at her pleasure. A week later Sir William Cavendish got his patent passed on Arabella’s nomination and there is clear evidence that he was finally brought to pay for it” (50). The distinction was further blurred by the creation and marketing of the lower level aristocratic title of baronet in 1611. This marketing of honors, of course, is what Peacham’s text complains about as an accomplished fact by the end of James’s reign.

According to Jankowski, the waxing of wealth as a prerequisite for attaining higher social status and the waning of the criteria of blood and virtue in the commercialized patronage system of Jacobean England combined with the emergent and growing market economy in seventeenth century had the effect of favoring “mercantile values,” which she defines as “values that revolve around productive labor in support of the state – labor that can and should be engaged in by members of any class” (164). These values are similar in nature to the values that Stone records as emphasized by political theorists in their concepts of gentility. They are also similar to the virtues stressed by Fabricio in Nenna’s dialogue as indicative of his “superior” gentility. Jankowski reads Eastward Ho!, in particular the debate that the play stages between the industrious apprentice Golding and the prodigal apprentice Quicksilver, in the context of these emergent values. “Eastward Ho!” she argues, “underscores the fact that gentry and mercantile values are wildly different and privileges the latter over the former” (164). Thus, in Jankowski’s reading, the play, far from endorsing a feudal concept of nobility, favors an almost modern style capitalist social structure where inherent class is irrelevant.
to rank. As such, her reading highlights the play’s elevation of virtue as a necessary requisite for confirming a gentleman in his rank, a concept which fits with contemporary political theories of the nature of gentility, as shown above. On the other hand, though, her reading obscures the play’s emphasis on the propriety of class structure, and particularly on higher rank as the deserved reward of blood confirmed by virtue that the play’s moral satire features.

*Eastward Ho!* does clearly endorse the virtue and industry of the citizen characters Golding, Touchstone, and Mildred over the prodigal “gentlemanly” traits of Quicksilver, Gertrude, and Petronell Flash. The latter group of characters seems to see great wealth as the sole criterion for gentility, and they also identify the behavior that confirms rank with the lavish and prodigal spending that, as Smuts notes above, had become a noted trait of the Stuart court. Their concepts of gentility are not those that Jonson’s comedies ever sanction. The mercantile values of the former characters are endorsed, in large part, however, because those characters are content to remain within the boundaries of their social class. Unlike Gertrude and Quicksilver, Golding and Mildred are under no compulsion to quickly parlay their wealth into social rank and go “ramping to gentilitie,” as the fool Sogliardo does in *Every Man Out of his Humor* (3.2.67). Moreover, the gentility that Quicksilver and Gertrude are so determined to take upon themselves is not gentility according to the feudal ideal, wherein their rank is conferred for or confirmed by meritorious deeds – the type of gentility praised in Jonson’s epigram to Thomas Howard. Rather, the gentility they pursue is characterized by extravagant and conspicuous consumption. Rather than blood confirmed in deeds, their ideal of gentlemanly behavior is defined by wealth consumed in prodigality. As the
Thomas Howard of Jonson’s epigram is the paragon of traditional feudal concepts of a gentleman, so the paragon of wastrel gentility embodied in this play is the debt-ridden knight, Sir Petronell Flash, a knight who has wasted his entire estate in gaming, drinking, and general appetite-driven prodigality. His gentility is one of blood, but it is not at all confirmed by virtuous deeds. *Eastward Ho!,* consistent with Jonson’s other satiric comedies, thus seems to be more of a criticism of those who affect or occupy a station above their “virtues” than it is an endorsement of the nascent middle class values of a mercantile gentility. Just as many of Jonson’s laudatory epigrams praise particular English gentlemen and gentlewomen who have – at least as they are depicted in his verse – been exemplars of the traditional ideals of gentility, so this play, like his other middle comedies, exposes and ridicules those who pervert those ideals with a concept of gentility based on wealth and lavish consumption.

Perhaps no character in *Eastward Ho!* exhibits as strong a desire to parlay her wealth into elevated rank as Gertrude, the eldest daughter of the citizen goldsmith, Touchstone. Gertrude, like Sogliardo in *Every Man Out*, who is “so enamour’d of the name of Gentleman, that he will haue it, though he buyes it,” is obsessed with becoming a lady (*EMO* Character Descriptions 78-79). Although Gertrude is unlike Sogliardo in that she will not achieve gentility by purchase but, rather, by marrying a knight, her means of gaining rank are not as different from Sogliardo’s as they might appear at first glance. The marriage to Sir Petronell Flash is intended, as many marriages between wealthy citizens’ daughters and aristocrats were at the time, to repair the prodigal knight’s ruined estate with Gertrude’s money. In a sense, she very well could be said to be buying her name of lady.
Her father explains Gertrude’s obsession with being a lady in the play’s opening act. Contrasting her ambition with the contentedness of his other daughter, Mildred, he says of Gertrude, “The one must bee Lady-fied forsooth: and be attir’d iust to the Court-cut, and long tayle. So farre is she ill naturde to the place and means of my preferment and fortune, that shee throwes all the contempt and dispight, hatred itself can cast vpon it” (1.1.85-89). As Touchstone’s description foreshadows, Gertrude’s obsession with being a lady focuses on the external benefits that accompany gentility, such as the privileges of wearing fashionable clothing and receiving deference from those below her on the social scale. She demonstrates her anticipation of both of these privileges in her first appearance in the play, which finds her in the process of being dressed in upper class finery in order to meet her knight and future husband, Petronell Flash.

At the opening of the second scene, as she is being dressed, Gertrude, “in French head attire, & Citizens gowne” alternates between barking orders at her dressers and reveling in anticipation of her impending gentility. “O sister Mill,” she says, “though my father be a low-capt tradsman, yet I must be a Lady: and I praise God my mother must call me Medam . . . off with this gowne for shames sake, off with this gowne: let not my Knight take me in the Citty cut in any hand” (1.2.3-8). When her sister rebukes her, urging her not to scorn their father’s trade, the trade that in large part has provided her with sufficient wealth to become a lady, Gertrude reiterates her resolution and attacks the sartorial poverty of her citizen sister:

I tell you I cannot indure [citizenhood], I must be a Lady: doo you weare your Quoffe with a London licket, your Stammell petticoate with two guardes, the Buffin gowne with the Tuf-taffitie cape, and the Veluet lace.
I must be a Lady, and I will be a Lady. I like some humors of the Cittie Dames well, to eate Cherries onely at an Angell a pound, good; to dye rich Scarlet black, Pretty; to line a Grogaram gowne clean thorough with velvet, tolerable: their pure linen, their smocks of 3. li. a smock are to be borne withall. But your minsing niceryes, taffeta pipkins, durance petticotes, & siluer bodkins: -- Gods my life, as I shall be a Lady I cannot indure it. (1.2.14-25)

The fixation with clothing and surface mannerisms in Gertrude’s arrogant indictment of citizen women as compared with ladies reveals the extent to which she identifies social rank with its outward appearances and behaviors, especially the degree to which fashions, for her, signify class. Her shallow equations of character with fashion are justly punished in true comic irony, when, after her knight has left her destitute, she is forced to wander through London in her waistcoat, a garb which would label her a prostitute.

The virtuous deeds that should confirm noble rank are irrelevant to Gertrude, who is, incidentally, not of noble birth. Her conception of lady-hood is wrapped up entirely in courtly extravagance and quibbles of deference to her new rank. Her insistence on the latter, revealed above in her absurd insistence that her mother call her “Medam,” is further revealed in conversation with her mother later in the scene regarding the order that their coaches must travel in:

Gir. I mother, I must bee a Ladie to morrow: and by your leaue mother (I speake it not without my dutie, but onely in the right of my husband) I must take place of you, Mother.
Mistris Touch. That you shall Lady-daughter, and haue a Coach as well as I too.

Gir. Yes mother. But by your leave mother, (I speake it not without my dutie, but onely in my husbands right) my Coach-horses must take the wall of your Coach-horses. (1.2.105-113)

Gertrude’s fixation with riding in a coach, which she expresses at various times in the play, also illustrates her identification of gentility with the luxury and conspicuous consumption that characterized much of the Jacobean court.

Gertrude’s aspirations towards gentility are repeatedly criticized by the play’s more sympathetically drawn characters in proverbial admonitions that articulate a conservative moral of being content with one’s station. In Gertrude’s dressing scene, for instance, her sister Mildred warns her that no good will come of her rapid rise to elevated place. “Where Titles presume to thrust before fit meanes to second them,” she advises, “Wealth and Respect often growe sullen and will not follow. . . . Where ambition of place goes before fitnesse of birth, contempt and disgrace follow” (1.2.31-35). Mildred goes on to indict interclass marriages as a whole: “But sure I judge them truely madde, that yoake citizens and courtiers, trades men and soouldiers, a goldsmiths daughter and a knight” (1.2.38-40). Their father, Touchstone, later articulates his own proverbial wisdom against such ostentatious social climbing, saying, “Ambition consumes itselfe with the very show” (3.2.138-39).

Especially given the contrast that the play foregrounds between the aspirations of Gertrude and the contentedness of her sister Mildred, the “unnaturalness” of ambitious social climbing decidedly comes under heavy criticism in the satiric representation of
Gertrude, but she is perhaps less indicted for her desire to be a lady, than for her ideas of what a lady is. As has been shown, for Gertrude, being a lady means luxury and consumption. A revealing contrast can be made between Gertrude’s idea of what it means to be a lady and the noble virtues of a lady that Jonson lauds in the epigrams he writes in praise of Lucy, Countess of Bedford, his long-time friend and patroness.

Jonson’s praises of Lucy in the *Epigrams*, as with all of his poems praising the virtues of noble personages, of course, present a highly idealized picture of his patroness, rather than a thorough depiction of her character – any faults are omitted. Jonson would later acknowledge and lament the extent to which those praised by his laudatory verses often failed to live up to his praises in a prefatory poem that he provided for Selden’s *Titles of Honor*. There, the poet admits that he has “too oft preferr’d / Men past their termes, and prais’d some names too much” (20-21). It seems doubtful, though, that the Countess of Bedford was one of the personages who sparked much of Jonson’s regret, given that the *Epigrams*, first published in 1612, contain no less than three poems in praise of her as an ideal patroness and lady, all of which pay particular homage to her intellect and learning, virtues for which Jonson had tremendous respect. Thomas Howard, given his subsequent actions, was far more likely the type to have sparked this poetic regret. Moreover, Herford and Simpson note that the Countess was “a brilliant figure at [the Jacobean] Court both for her beauty and talent” (11,14). Bernard Newdigate’s preface to his edition of Jonson’s non-dramatic verse also notes the good reputation that Lucy had with poets in particular: “Lucy countess of Bedford, the friend and patroness of Drayton, Florio, Daniel, Jonson, and Donne, who all alike proclaim her beauty, her learning, and her wit” (x). Whether or not the historical Lucy – or Howard for that matter – lived up to their
noble characterizations in Jonson’s verse, however, is somewhat beside the point. The
noble virtues praised in these poems remain as ideal virtues of nobility, virtues which are
decidedly absent from characters, like Gertrude, who are the objects of satire in Jonson’s
comedies. As Jonson says in the preface to Selden’s work, even when he inaccurately
praised individuals for being virtuous, “‘twas with purpose to have made them such”
(22). The epigrams in praise of Lucy can thus be seen as a positive foil for the abuses of
gentlewomen that are satirized in the character of Gertrude.

In Epigram LXXVI, “On Lucy Countess of Bedford,” for example, Jonson praises
Lucy by way of describing his dream of an ideal patroness, which turns out to be Lucy,
and lauds her not only for her noble descent but, primarily, for the virtues of her
character, which confirm and legitimate her noble blood,

I meant to make her faire, and free, and wise,
Of greatest bloud, and yet more good than great;
I meant the day-starre should not brighter rise,
Nor lend like influence from his lucent seat.
I meant shee should be curteous, facile, sweet,
Hating that solemne vice of greatnesse, pride;
I meant each softest vertue, there should meet
Fit in that softer bosome to reside. (5-12)

Another epigram devoted to Lucy, Epigram LXXXIII, extols her generosity and
patronage to the poet and takes note of how her patronage produces the fruits of good
poetry:

Madame, I told you late how I repented,
I ask’d a lord a buck, and he denyed me;
And ere I could aske you, I was preuented:
For your most noble offer had supply’d me.
Straight went I home; and there most like a Poet,
I fancied to my selfe, what wine, what wit
I would haue spent: how euery Muse should know it,
And PHOEBVS-selfe should be at eating it.  (1-8)

The virtues Jonson admires that confirm Lucy’s birth are very nearly opposite to the attributes of being a lady that Gertrude displays. Her pride of place is demonstrated in her insistence that her mother defer to her, and in her repeated refusal, after Flash has left her destitute, to submit herself to her father for help. While Lucy is a discerning patroness of good poetry, as Jonson asserts in Epigram XCI, which praises Lucy for her patronage of Donne’s satires and calls her, “Life of the Muses day, their morning-starre” (2), Gertrude’s only act of patronage is to employ a servant to run alongside her coach for no other purpose than the appearance of wealth that it implies (3.2.42-45).

Gertrude does have an interest in poetry, as evidenced by her constant recitation of bits of verse throughout the play, but the poor quality of the poetry that she quotes shows her to be lacking the necessary judgment to be a proper patroness of the arts, unlike the Countess of Bedford. Lucy, with her wealth and rank, serves a socially beneficial role as a benefactress and a patroness; Lady Flash, with her wealth and rank, serves no purpose other than her own pleasure. The argument that seems to be made by Gertrude’s character is that gentility founded in wealth alone is a sham of gentility.
In Gertrude’s defense, it should be pointed out that her concept of noble behavior is consistent with the habits of prodigal consumption modeled by the only character on stage possessing an official title of honor, her husband, Sir Petronell Flash. Part of James’s reason for exhorting Henry to virtue in *Basilikon Doron* is that the behavior of the prince and his court would be imitated by their dependents and constituents lower on the social scale, whether that behavior be virtuous or vicious. James writes, “And as every one of the people will delight to follow the example of any of the Courteours, as well in evill as in good: so what crime so horrible can there be committed and over-seen in a Courteour, that will not be an examplare excuse for any other boldly to commit the like?” (46). If the nobility is virtuous, so runs James’s logic, then the nation as a whole will follow suit, and vice versa. The characters in *Eastward Ho!* bear out James’s argument in its negative capacity. Flash’s extreme prodigality and wastrel behavior is imitated by those others in the play who aspire to nobility, Gertrude and Francis Quicksilver.

A similar contrast to the one made between Gertrude and Lucy can be made between the prodigal character of Sir Petronell Flash and the virtue of Sir Thomas Howard or the self-sacrificing valor of Sir Henry Cary, lauded in Epigram LXVI. Flash’s knighthood is not displayed in martial exploits or civic duties but in devoting himself to the leisure of the city. Meeting with Quicksilver and the money-bawd Securitie in the play’s second act, Flash announces,

> Ile out of this wicked towne as fast as my horse can trot: Here’s now no good action for a man to spend is time in. Tauerns growe dead; Ordinaries are blowne vp; Playes are at a stand; Howses of Hospitallitie at a fall; not
a Feather wauing, nor a Spurre gingling any where: Ile away instantlie.

(2.2.218-223)

If there is no entertainment to be had in the city, Flash will off to some other venue.

The lack of available pleasure pursuits is not Flash’s only reason for getting out of town, however. He is also running from his creditors, as he reveals later in the scene: “Ile out of Towne, though I soiourne with a friend of mine, for staye here I must not; my creditors haue laide to arrest me, and I haue no friend vnder heauen but my Sword to baile me” (2.2.258-61). His design in marrying Gertrude is to get some quick money from her dowry before taking a ship to Virginia. In an event of rather ironic justice, his plan is thwarted when he stays too long in drunken revelry with the sailors he has contracted and misses the favorable tide and weather, getting caught in a storm on the Thames and washed ashore at Cuckold’s Haven. When the captain, Seagull, urges him to hurry to their ship to change out of their wet clothes on the following morning, Flash responds, “Nay by my troth, let our clothes rotte vpon vs, and let vs rotte in them: twentie to one our Ship is attacht by this time; if we set her not vnder Saile this last Tide, I neuer lookt for any other” (4.1.192-95). Flash’s assertion that the ship is “attachd” indicates his assumption that his creditors have caught up with him and that he will no longer be able to leave town. His intemperate behavior is a satiric critique of the irresponsible prodigality of the Jacobean court. His consumptive behavior prevents him from maintaining the dignity of his title in that it subjects him to the will of his lower-ranking creditors. Rather than confirming the honor of his birth, his behavior de-legitimizes it. His very name implies the brief, visible blast of aristocratic prodigality that, as Touchstone says, “consumes itselfe with the very show” (3.2.138-39).
The characterization of Flash is a satiric illustration of the loss of the gentility’s “symbolic capital,” to borrow Peck’s term, that accompanied Jacobean inflation of honors and the luxurious habits of consumption of the Jacobean court. The loss of respect for the gentleman classes around this time is illustrated in the way that Touchstone deals with his new son-in-law. Though Gertrude and her mother can see no further than Flash’s title and the privileges appertaining thereto, Touchstone suspects the monetary motives for the suit of marriage to his daughter, and even as he gives his daughter’s hand, he lets Flash know that he will be providing no more money to Flash than what is necessary or reasonably warranted:

*M. Touch.* Sir, ye are come, what is not mine to keepe, I must not be sorry to forgoe: A 100 li. Land her Grandmother left her, tis yours, her selfe (as her mothers gift) is yours. But if you expect ought from me, know, my hand and mine eyes open together; I doe not giue blindly: Worke vpon that now.

*Sir Pet.* Sir, you mistrust not my meanes? I am a Knight.

*Touch.* Sir; What I know not, you will giue me leaue to say, I am ignorant of. (2.1.88-96)

The context of the play suggests that Touchstone’s disavowal of knowledge is in reference to Flash’s means, not his rank, implying the goldsmith’s justified skepticism towards the assumption that one possessing rank must also possess wealth. Touchstone is not the only citizen to express a dubious estimation of knighthood in the play, however. When Flash and his cohorts are apprehended after washing ashore and brought before Golding, who has by this time been raised to an alderman for his industrious character,
the former good apprentice mocks them in lines that imply that knighthood is no more than an empty sartorial appearance: “What? a Knight, and his Fellow thus accoutred? Where are their Hattes, and Feathers, their Rapiers, and their Cloakes?” (4.2.199-201). Even the characters that are initially taken with the show of Jacobean knighthood are made to realize its vacuity. After Flash’s desertion of her has left her with no money, Gertrude, herself, laments how far the standards of knighthood have fallen from their feudal ideals:

The Knighthood now a daies, are nothing like the Knighthood of old time. They rid a horseback, Ours goe afoote. They were attended by their Squires, Ours by their Lacquaies. They went buckled in their Armor, Ours muffled in their Cloakes. They trauaild wildernesses, & desarts, Ours dare scarce walke the streets. They were stil prest to engage their Honour, Ours stil ready to paune their cloaths. They would gallop on at sight of a Monster, Ours run away at sight of a Serieant. They would helpe poore Ladies, Ours make poor Ladies. (5.1.34-43)

Her woman-servant Sin defy responds in a summative statement that shows the extent to which drinking and gaming have replaced duty and valor as the defining characteristic of knighthood: “I Madam, they were knights of the Round-Table at Winchester, that sought Adventures, but these of the Square Table at Ordinaries, that sit at Hazard” (5.1.44-46).

Though this play satirically exposes the prodigality of the early Jacobean gentility primarily by staging a conflict between an intemperate gentry, including those who would join their ranks, and contented citizens who thrive by their temperance, another prominent method of satiric exposure that is employed in the play is the duping of the
play’s gulls by Touchstone’s clever but wastrel apprentice, Francis Quicksilver. Quicksilver’s chief gulling device in this play is the scheme he engineers to trick Gertrude into signing her grandmother’s estate over to Flash so that the knight can, in turn, mortgage it with the usurer Securitie and, hence, finance his escape voyage to Virginia. Quicksilver’s plot exposes Gertrude’s Lady-blinded naiveté, and he puts an exclamation point on her appetite-clouded folly, when he remarks, following her hasty signing of the document without reading it, “It goes downe without chewing y’faith” (3.2.173). Quicksilver’s gulling of Gertrude also exposes the dishonor of Flash, which Gertrude later laments, as noted above, and the excessive greed of the usurer Securitie, too. He hatches another scheme on the heels of his plot to gull Gertrude that further exposes Securitie’s intemperate greed, when he tricks him into leaving his wife alone and unguarded at home, allowing Flash to steal her temporarily away for their voyage to Virginia.

Much of the duping that identifies Quicksilver with Jonson’s other clever servant types, though, takes place off stage in the form of antecedent action. Near the beginning of the play, Quicksilver is revealed to have been spending time in the company of gallants, encouraging them to waste their means in leisurely pursuits like drinking, gaming, and prostitution, then bringing them to Securitie where they mortgage their estates for credit gained at high interest. In return, Securitie keeps Quicksilver attired and accoutered like a gallant so that he may keep gentle company. Quicksilver, shortly following his dismissal as Touchstone’s apprentice, describes the nature of their symbiotic (and parasitic) relationship in announcing his new freedom from his apprenticeship: “I am now loose, to get more children of perdition into thy usurous
Bonds. Thou feed’st my Lecherie, and I thy Couetousnes: Thou are Pandar to me for my
wench, and I to thee for thy coosenages: K. me, K. thee, runnes through Court and
Country” (2.2.13-17). The existence of the con operation that is run by Quicksilver and
Securitie, a con operation of the type that is writ more large in the venture tripartite of
*The Alchemist*, is an indirect indictment of the prodigality of the young Jacobean gentry
that mortgages their feudal estates, estates that should be used for the maintenance of
their tenancy, for the conspicuous pleasures of the city.

The duping of gulls by a clever social inferior is, of course, nothing new in
Jonsonian comedy. Quicksilver’s duping contains an additional element of satire,
though, because his extortion provides the means by which, he, himself, attempts to gain
entry to the upper class.

Ostensibly, Quicksilver can claim gentility as a right of his birth. He is a son of a
gentleman, if only a second son and thus left out of a landed inheritance by rules of
primogeniture. He reminds Touchstone and Golding repeatedly of his gentle blood, as in
the opening scene, where he maintains his gentility as justification for his prodigal
behavior and attempts to get Golding to roar it with him:

> Sfoot man I am a gentleman, and may sweare by my pedigree, Gods my
> life. Sirrah Goulding, wilt be ruled by a foole? turne good fellow, turne
> swaggering gallant, and let the Welkin roare, and Erebus also: Looke not
> Westward to the fall of Don Phœbus, but to the East; Eastward Hoe. . . .
> (1.1.105-109)

When Golding asks just what Quicksilver would have him do, the latter responds with
advice that shows that he, like Gertrude and Flash, equates gentility with indolence and
leisure. He responds, “Why do nothing, be like a gentleman, be idle, the curse of man is labour. . . . Wilt thou crie, what is yee lack? stand with a bare pate, and a dropping nose, under a wodden pent-house, and art a gentleman? wilt though beare Tankards, and maist beare Armes?” (1.1.118-24).

As Gertrude stands upon the right of her husband, so Quicksilver stands upon his blood, and as Gertrude puts into practice her idea of nobility by spending on fine clothing and a coach, Quicksilver illustrates his “gentility” by scorning labor, wearing a sword, and often getting himself drunk. Quicksilver may possess a claim of gentility by blood, but he lacks the virtues to confirm his birth. Moreover, just as it is Gertrude’s money that gains her entry into the upper class, by virtue of the fact that it is her finances which attract her husband, so it is the money that Quicksilver supplies to gallants in order to aid their profligate behaviors that gains his entry into gallant society. He reveals as much in self-defense when he must answer Touchstone’s charge about the company he keeps. He argues that he is putting Touchstone’s gold – which he is later revealed to have essentially pilfered – out to farm among the gallants that he revels with, and promises his master returns:

I lend them monnies, good; they spend it, well. But when they are spent, must not they striue to get more? must not their land flye? and to whom? shall not your worship ha’ the refusal? Well, I am a good member of the Citty if I were well considered. How would Merchants thriue, if Genlemen would not be vnthriftes? How could Gentlemen be vnthriftes if their humours were not fed? How should their humours be fedde but by whit-meate, and cunning secondings? Well, the Cittie might consider vs.
I am going to an Ordinary now; the gallants fall to play, I carry light golde with me: the gallants call Coozen Some golde for siluer, I change, gaine by it, the gallants loose the gold; and then call Coozen Franck lend me some siluer. (1.1.28-41).

Like Gertrude, Francis Quicksilver is admitted among the gentility because, between the money he steals from Touchstone and the means that Securitie supplies him with, he has ready cash for them to finance their prodigal lifestyle, which is characterized by indolence and immoderate spending. Quicksilver’s above speech, and the con operation it describes, satirically exposes both the financial prodigality of the feudal Jacobean gentry and the corrupt commercial ethics of the emergent mercantile class, many of whom sought to join the ranks of the gentry by means of the money that had just fleeced them of. While the merchants’ greed reveals them to be unfit gentlemen, the prodigal consumption of London’s young gallants renders them just as susceptible to the schemes of a duplicitous apprentice as the greed of a Roman agelast renders him susceptible to the schemes of his clever slave.

Touchstone rejects Quicksilver’s project because he does not wish to profit from the downfall of other men (1.1.44-45). Securitie, however, has no such scruples. He is only too happy to finance Quicksilver’s gallant living and reap the profits of cheating young nobles. Quicksilver’s duping of prodigal gallants might make him a more praiseworthy character in this satire, like Brainworm is in *Every Man in his Humor*, if he were not concerned for his own profit and social advancement in his exploits. Because he seeks his own gain, though, and not genuinely that of either of his masters, Touchstone or Securitie, his machinations take on a less excusable character. Moreover, the satire of
the consumptive gentle society and corrupt patronage system that are so voracious in
their desire for wealth that they allow for the kind of parasitic rise of a Quicksilver is
made more invective because frauds, like Quicksilver, who would affect the gentleman
courtier for their own profit, are apparently not atypical. Quicksilver implies that his
parasitic “villanie” is rather usual for early seventeenth century London in discussing his
cozening with Securitie: “Why, man, tis the London high-way to thrift; if vertue be vsde,
tis but as a scrappe to the nette of villanie. They that vse it simplie, thrive simplie I
warrant. Waight and fashion makes Goldsmiths Cockolds” (2.2.25-28). Quicksilver’s
credo here belies a lack of moral ethics. In a commercial urban environment where
wealth is lauded as the only real virtue, any means of effectively getting money,
including cozening, usury, “villanie” what have you, is rewarded with thriving. This city
atmosphere that rewards only wealth is something the opposite of the ideal system of
rewarding virtue that James, Selden, and Jonson imagine.

The clever apprentice Quicksilver thus produces a double satiric indictment of the
corruption and foolish consumption of the early Jacobean gentility. He exposes their
prodigal appetites by schemes that dupe them of their estates by playing upon their
intemperate desires for getting and spending, and he further indicts them when he
demonstrates that imitation and financing of the consumptive habits of the gentility can
gain his entry into their society.

Quicksilver’s entrée into the society of gallants is especially damning given his
dramatic heritage as a descendant of Roman clever slaves. The inheritance from the
clever slave type is much less obvious in Quicksilver’s characterization than it is in, say,
Brainworm’s, but elements of the character type are still present and important to his role
in the comic plot. Like a Plautine slave, Quicksilver displays his ingenuity in devising a plan for a young gentleman (Petronell Flash) to get money by illicit means, and further devises a scheme for the young knight to steal his young paramour (Winifred, Securitie’s wife) from a greedy senex (Securitie). Moreover, Quicksilver’s drunkenness and aiding and abetting in the dissipation of wanton aristocratic youth recalls the drunkenness of Pseudolus in the play that bears his name as well as Tranio’s facilitation of and participation in the prodigality of Philolaches and his cohorts in Mostellaria. What is particularly damning of gallant society in Jacobean England in Quicksilver’s characterization is that the same character traits that identify the clever apprentice with a New Comic slave are largely the same character traits that insinuate him with the young gallants in the play as one of their own. Quicksilver’s characterization identifies him simultaneously as an heir of the slave type and a budding Jacobean gallant. The double identification is, in itself, a satiric critique of the Jacobean gentility primarily because of the unsavory moral character ascribed by contemporary literary critics to the clever slaves, but also, to a lesser extent, because of the implied identification of the typical behaviors of gallants with “parasitic” servants, an implication that could not but come across as an accusatory insult to a society that, for the most part, believed so firmly in a stratified social hierarchy.

Though he shares a dramatic heritage with others of Jonson’s witty, scheming servant types like Brainworm and Carlo Buffone, Quicksilver’s role as an expositor in Eastward Ho! is somewhat muted in that his duping schemes are less an instrument of exposing the vices of other characters than are their own humors. Moreover, Quicksilver, himself, is one of the chief targets of the play’s moral satire. In the play’s comic ending,
Quicksilver, Flash, and Gertrude all repent of their appetites, and noble virtues triumph over the vices of a prodigal gentry in the formerly vicious characters. Such is not the case with Quicksilver’s clever servant type successors in two of Jonson’s next Jacobean comedies, Mosca in *Volpone* and Face in *The Alchemist*. The reproof of wealth as a prominent means of social advancement becomes a chief object of satire in these plays, and the roles of Mosca and Face in exposing this vice, as well as the threat they pose to enter the upper classes are substantially heightened.

III

The focus of satiric critique in *Volpone* on greed and society’s overvaluation of wealth is immediately apparent in the oft-cited opening speech of the play’s title character. Drawing aside the curtain that reveals his horde, Volpone simultaneously opens his day and the comedy itself with a paean to his wealth that sordidly parodies a morning prayer of religious devotion:

Good morning to the day; and, next, my gold:
Open the shrine, that I may see my saint.
Haile the worlds soule and mine. More glad then is
The teeming earth, to see the long’d-for sunne
Peepe through the hornes of the celestiall ram,
Am I, to view thy splendor, darkening his:
That, lying here, amongst my other hoords,
Shew’st like a flame, by night; or like the day
Strooke out of chaos, when all darkenesse fled
Vnto the center. (1.1.1-10)
Volpone’s usage of the rhetoric of a morning prayer of adoration in addressing his accumulated wealth gives the impression that his lust for money has reached the level of religious idolatry. This idolatry of placing gold in the place of God is reinforced later in his prayer when he uses even more explicitly Christian rhetoric in his address to his gold, . . . Deare saint,

Riches, the dumbe god, that giu’st all men tongues:
That canst doe nought, and yet mak’st men doe all things;
The price of soules; euen hell, with thee to boot,

Is made worth heauen! (1.1.21-25)

Gold is the first mover in Volpone’s idolatrous theology, that which causes things to happen, which “mak’st men doe all things.” The logic of Volpone’s praise of his gold is similar to Possidonio’s praise of riches for their quality of “making a way” for one who would not otherwise be qualified into the ranks of the nobility (Nenna 24). Volpone, of course, is not only talking about the power of gold to influence patronage; the power he praises is much more comprehensive. The power of gold to make things happen in human affairs, however, does include its central role in determining the distribution of patronage, as is illustrated later in the play when Volpone intimates that he will leave his fortune to the client that lauds the most gifts upon him. Wealth also had power to influence patronage in Jacobean London, where, as has been shown above, offices and titles of honor were often bestowed increasingly more often upon those whose wealth enabled them to pay for the honors than on those whose personal virtues merited the rank.

The viciousness of considering wealth as a source of honor is made more vivid when praises of riches like Volpone’s and Possidonio’s are compared to pious
recognitions of noble rank as divine stewardship, like King James’s acknowledgment of the divine responsibility of his office in *Basilikon Doron*. There, James says of his kingship “that this glistening woldlie glorie of Kings, is given them by God, to teach them to presse so to glister and shine before their People, in al works of Sanctification and Righteousnes, that their Persons as bright Lamps of Godlines and Vertue may, going in and out before their People, give light to al their steps” (3). The source of James’s nobility is the sovereign hand of God, and his royal “glorie” is given him primarily as a means and responsibility to do good. Volpone’s elevated rank is, conversely, solely a result of his riches, and he uses the clout they bestow upon him only to increase his wealth and feed his appetites. The latter character’s conception of his status is representative of a commercialized and corrupt society that honors and prizes great wealth above all and which is satirized throughout the play, beginning with the parodic “hymn,” cited above, which supplants the God that James praises for his office with the all-sovereign idol of Gold. Professor Edward B. Partridge draws particular attention to this inverted theology, and the perverse ethics that result from it, in Volpone’s paean. In *The Broken Compass*, Partridge argues,

> The religious imagery helps dramatize the kind of society that is created when the main pursuit of men is the acquisition of riches. Volpone’s morning hymn embodies a new metaphysic and a new ethic, almost point for point the reverse of the Christian. Gold is the new god, the world’s soul, and its own saint. The visible, the temporal, the material is all. Hell, with riches, is “worth heauen”. Work is sin. Instead of humility, there is arrogance. Instead of the soul being inviolate, the soul has a price. (76)
L. C. Knights’ venerable study of Jonsonian drama, *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson*, sets Jonson’s hyperbolic satire of the elevation of wealth as a virtue in *Volpone* in the context of what he calls an “anti-acquisitive attitude” (200). This attitude, as Knights explains it, is a conservative reaction to habits of acquisition – getting and spending – that accompanied the emergence of capitalism in late sixteenth and early seventeenth century England. He argues, “The greed that forms the subject of *Volpone* includes both the desire of sensuous pleasure as an end in itself, and the desire for riches” (202). In Knights’s reading, the satire of acquisitive culture in the play is a direct moral reproof of the habits of hoarding wealth and spending it on luxuries that characterized the Jacobean gentry and the court.

Knights’s linking of the satire of acquisitive culture in *Volpone* directly to Jacobean London might seem something of a stretch, given that, *Volpone*, unlike Jonson’s earlier comedies, is set in Venice, not London. One can only speculate as to the ultimate reason for the foreign setting. Jonson, however, likely alludes to one reason in the epistle to Oxford and Cambridge that was prefaced to the 1607 quarto version of the play, wherein he includes a defense of his satiric program made many times throughout his career, namely that his satire has refrained from attacking particular persons and centered only on the vices themselves. Jonson protests,

I would aske of these supercilious politiques [who accuse him of libel],
what Nation, Society, or generall Order or State haue I prouokd? What publique Person? Whether haue I not in all these [plays] preseru’d their dignity, as mine owne person, safe? My WORKES are read, allow’d, (I speakE of those that are Intirely mine) looke into them: what broad
reproofes haue I vsd? where haue I bin particular? where personall? except to a Mimick, Cheater, Baud, or Buffon – creatures, for their insolencies, worthy to be tax’d? Or to which of these so pointingly, as he might not, either ingeniously have co[n]fest, or wisely dissembled his disease? (53-64)

The length and ardency of Jonson’s protestation gives indirect evidence of how unheeded his pleas of innocence from libel had been heretofore. He had, in fact, been imprisoned on two prior occasions for his satire hitting too close to home for the comfort of important public persons: once for *Isle of the Dogs* and once for *Volpone’s* immediate predecessor *Eastward Ho!* It seems not unreasonable that setting this satire in the remote locale of Venice gave the poet one more level of remove to keep his satire from being accused of attacking “particular” or “public” personages.

Plausible self-defense from charges of libel may not have been the only benefit of the Venetian setting of the comedy, however. Jonathan Goldberg argues for the importance of the Venetian setting in his reading of the play as interrogating Jacobean absolutism. Goldberg asserts, “There is a point in considering the play’s setting in some detail, for Venice – especially what historians call the myth of Venice – was richly appreciated in England, and Venice could be appropriate for absolutist dissimulation” (75). The “myth of Venice,” as it existed in Jonson’s London, was propagated in part by Gasparo Contarini’s *The Commonwealth and Government of Venice*, which was translated into English by Lewes Lewkenor in 1599 and which, Goldberg notes, is the basis for Jonson’s Venice in this play. Contarini praises the Venetian Commonwealth for
its republican principles, the virtues and wisdom of its founders, and its government by
laws and institutions rather than by individual whim:

This is that rare and excellent thing, wherein *Venice* seemeth to shine, and
to surpass all antiquitie, for though it is apparent that there hath beene
many commonwealths, which haue farre exceeded *Venice* as well in
empire and greatnesse of estate, as in militarie discipline and glory of the
wars: yet hath there not been any, that may be paragoned with this of ours,
for institutions & lawes prudently decreed to establish vnto the inhabitates
a happie and prosperous felicitie . . . . our auncestors, from whome wee
haue receyued so flourishing a commonwealth, all in one did vnite
themselves in a consenting desire to establish, honour, and amplify their
country, without hauing in a manner any the least regarde of their owne
priuate glorie or commodity. (5-6)

Contarini’s description of Venice makes it appear a political utopia for meritocratic
writers like Nenna, Selden and Jonson, for there, according to Contarini, the benefit of
the commonwealth and the virtues of state are prized above “priuate glory or
commodity.” The noble ancestors of the Venetian republic – and their heirs, it is implied
– are more concerned with the good of the state and justice than they are with their own
status and estates. Goldberg describes the quasi-utopian ideal of Venice that derived
from the myth propagated by Contarini as follows:

Man as a naturally political animal finds his fulfillment in Venice, where
law is the product of consultation, rationality overcomes private desire,
and the state, in its complex interlocking of princely rule in the doge,
aristocracy in the senate, and democracy in the council of citizens, presents the perfect order of the Polybian mixed state, replete with checks and balances, opportunities and limits, self-regulating and self-controlling in its totally rational disposition. . . . It was . . . a mirror of perfect government, uncorrupted justice. (76-77)

In Goldberg’s reading of Volpone, the satiric target of the play is the republican myth of Venice and the absolutist “oligarchic state” that the myth hides (78). The central legacy scheme of the title character, he argues, “penetrates the myth of Venice and aims at the subversion of the republic, the unmasking of the vice beneath the show, absolutist aims that he exemplifies and which his suitors and servants imitate” (79).

The “absolutist aims” are not the only “vice beneath the show,” however, in the Venice of Volpone. The greater vice that undermines the virtuous republican principles of the most serene republic in Jonson’s comedy is the elevation of riches as the paramount source of honor and power in that society, an elevation which, the play indicates, cannot but corrupt a culture, even one founded on republican virtues. The rationality, impartiality, justice, and rule of law that Contarini ascribes to his city give way in Volpone’s Venice to an amoral morass ruled by insatiable greed, by the lust for riches and the power that comes with them. The ideals of virtue and merit as sources of honor have been entirely replaced by wealth in the Venetian society that the play depicts, as indicated by Volpone’s hymn to his gold.

The corruption of republican virtues by the overvaluation of wealth in Jonson’s Venice – what Knights refers to as the “acquisitive attitude” – parallels the corruption of Jacobean patronage by the commoditization of honors and offices in seventeenth century

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England, and the destabilization of the social hierarchy that accompanied it. Just as the Venetian republic is corrupted by the greed and extravagant consumption of its grandees, so Jacobean society is corrupted by the extravagant luxury of its gallants and the corresponding commoditization of the offices and honors of patronage. The source of both of these corruptions, as the play depicts it, is the inordinate veneration of wealth, especially in the place of virtue and merit, as that which is most to be sought after, and thus, as that which is most honored by society. Therefore, in satirizing the greed and overvaluation of wealth, particularly the way that wealth becomes the chief “virtue” in commercial Venice, *Volpone* also obliquely exposes to satiric treatment the parallel elevation of wealth over merit in the value system of Jacobean England. This satire, similar to the satire in *Eastward Ho!* and the earlier humors comedies, has particular implications for the increasingly commercialized practice of patronage in James’s administration, which reinforced the excessive veneration of wealth that already accompanied the emergence of a capitalist economy. One of the key satiric indictments of the privileging of wealth over merit in society is the assertion that such privileging leads inevitably to corruption.

Linda Levy Peck’s study of the culture of corruption within court patronage in the Jacobean era provides a more specific context for this particular indictment of the corruption of Jacobean culture in *Volpone*. As noted above, the increased commercialization of the patronage system in conjunction with the proliferation of offices and honors under James’s administration led to personal wealth becoming more and more of a factor in the attaining of a higher social rank in Jacobean England, especially when titles could be more or less openly purchased, as in the case of Sir
This commercialization of patronage, as Peck describes it, seemed inevitably to lead to corruption in the dispensing of titles and offices, which often simply went to the highest bidder. The corruption of the process whereby these honors were dispensed, as Peck also notes, was compounded by the latent medieval custom of gift giving as a way of expressing loyalty to patrons or of bestowing reward to clients among the feudal aristocracy.

Gifts were often given as tokens of appreciation for a favor, such as the granting of an office or title. As the number of offices and the available capital for monetary “gifts” increased, it became increasingly difficult to separate gift-giving from bribery.

Peck describes the difficulty of detecting and preventing the corruption of patronage as it developed in the early years of James’s reign as follows:

The tension around these principal foci of political corruption, office, and gift, remained over the centuries in uneasy balance. That tension was increased by new social and economic conditions in the sixteenth century. The confluence of increasing commercialization of the economy, growth of trade and inflation, the lavish style of the Renaissance and Baroque court that made office-holding an expensive luxury, and the pressure of a larger landed elite on royal bounty, [sic] established the context for corrupt practices and increased the sale of extraction. (162-63)

As an effect of these processes, possessing wealth became an increasingly necessary qualification for the English upper classes not only to obtain, but also maintain their rank and office.
In the system of Jacobean patronage, as Peck describes it, would-be gentlemen needed money in order to supply well-placed gifts that might gain them titles or offices. Once established in a high ranking social place, more money was needed in order to finance the lifestyle that had become associated with the upper classes as well as to continue to give “gifts” that would hopefully net economic perquisites, such as monopolies or pensions, which might help maintain the “gentlemanly” lifestyle. The lust for money that is critiqued by English satirists like Jonson is, thus, not necessarily confined to greed in the absolute moral sense, but greed as a symptom of a corrupt and commercialized system of attaining and maintaining – or emulating, as the case may be – social rank.

The satire of greed and exaggerated habits of acquisition in *Volpone* certainly recognizes that wealth is a means of advance – in Jonson’s Venice as well as in Jacobean London – and critiques it as such. A portion of Volpone’s darkly parodic hymn to gold ironically notes the “virtue” of wealth as an attribute of “greatness.” Volpone praises gold by saying, “Thou art virtue, fame, / Honour, and all things else! Who can get thee, / He shall be noble, valiant, honest, wise” (1.1.25-27). Volpone’s lines laud gold as having taken the place of traditional feudal attributes of nobility, the virtues commended by Nenna, Selden, King James, and by Jonson in his laudatory epigrams. Mosca seconds the elevation of wealth in his interruption: “And what he will, sir. Riches are in fortune / A greater good, then wisedome is in nature” (1.1.28-29). The idolatrous hymn replaces the place of God as the first mover and source of virtue with gold at the outset, and here gold becomes virtue and honor itself. Riches not only bestow merit; they are merit in the corrupt society of Volpone’s Venice.
The folly of a society that values wealth above merit is illustrated most humorously in *Volpone* by the characterization of the play’s only English gentility, Sir Politic and Lady Would-be. The Would-bes are cut after the fashion of foolish newly-risen gentry that Jonson scathingly ridicules in earlier plays, characters like Gertrude Touchstone, Sogliardo, Stephen, and other gulls who achieve the rank of gentility by commercial means, rather than through their merits. Like them, the Would-bes suffer from a typical lack of gentlemanly virtues. They completely want of any sense of social responsibility and judgment that should ideally accompany the status of gentility, and, also like their gullish predecessors, they consistently reduce their sense of their rank to its external appearances and trappings. That the Would-bes’ gentility is probably purchased is indicated by Sir Politic Would-be, when he introduces himself to his companion, Peregrine, as “a poore knight” (2.1.26). The adjective “poore,” as Sir Pol uses it here, does not so much indicate his lack of financial means as it does the paucity of credentials it has taken to raise him to the knighthood. As the editors of the Norton *English Renaissance Drama* gloss the line, Sir Pol is one of “many” who purchased knighthood during James’s reign “whose birth, attainments, or wealth would not have previously merited a title” (Bevington et. al. 701). Whether the Would-bes’ gentility is actually purchased or not, though, they nonetheless represent the dangers of a society that bestows honors on the wealthy rather than the virtuous, for were rank equated with merit rather than with wealth, the Would-bes would have no place in the gentry. Their only claim to the upper classes is their affluence.

Lady Would-be, like her predecessor Gertrude Touchstone and like her dramatic successors the Ladies Collegiate in *Epicene* and Ladies Tailbush and Eitherside in *The
Devil is an Ass is a boor in gentlewomen’s clothing. Though she is apparently very taken with her rank, which is probably relatively new to her, she seems entirely lacking of any graces, virtues or wit, qualities that Jonson bestows upon the meritorious ladies of his latter comedies, such as Lady Fitzdotterel, Lady Loadstone, or Lady Frampul and her maid Prudence, and for which he praises court ladies in his laudatory epigrams. The only “virtues” that Lady Would-be possesses, other than her wealth, seems to be her garrulity, her forwardness and her loudness.

Like many of Jonson’s unmeritorious gentlewomen, including Gertrude Touchstone, Lady Would-be seems to mistakenly understand that maintaining an extravagant external appearance is the most important part of keeping up her elevated rank. When she first arrives at Volpone’s home, she exhibits a crude obsession with the finer points of her appearance that is reminiscent of Gertrude’s bullying of her tailors during her dressing scene in Eastward Ho!. No sooner is Lady Would-be admitted by Nano than she begins fixating on her dress and calling for her serving woman to remedy what defects she can see:

I Thank you, good sir. ‘Pray you signifie
Vnto your patron, I am here. This band
Shewes not my neck inough (I trouble you, sir,
Let me request you, bid one of my women
Come hither to me) in good faith, I am drest
Most fauourably, to day, it is no matter,
‘Tis well inough. (3.4.1-8)
The comic irony of Lady Would-be’s misguided equating of her merit with her outward appearance is that she is apparently not even very adept at maintaining that. At one point in her tirade, Nano remarks, “Now, St. MARKE / Deliuer vs: anon, shee’ll beate her women, / Because her nose is red,” thus implying that Lady Would-be is something of a hard-favored woman (3.4.14-15). As she continues to take inventory of her appearance, she finds more defects, and begins castigating her hapless serving women for their inattention to detail in dressing their lady’s hair:

. . . Come neerer: is this curle
In the right place? or this? why is this higher
Then all the rest? you ha’ not wash’d your eies, yet?
Or do they not stand euen i’ your head? (3.4.10-13)

When one of her serving women attempts to assuage her, pointing out that only “One haire a little, here, sticks out, forsooth,” she lights into them afresh:

Do’s ’t so forsooth? and where was your deare sight
When it did so forsooth? what now? bird-ey’d?
And you, too? ‘pray you both approch, and mend it.
Now (by that light) I muse, yo’ are not asham’d! (3.4.18-22)

Lady Would-be’s browbeating her servants satirically exposes her lack of social grace. Though possessed of sufficient money and wardrobe to be a gentlewoman, she is nonetheless lacking the personal attributes that should accompany her station.

Lady Would-be’s lack of the graces of gentility is most evidenced in her loud and garrulous habit of conversing, which is exposed in her unwelcome conversation with the “infirm” Volpone. When, following her obstreperous dressing down of her servants, she
inquires how her host is doing, he responds with a description of a bad dream that mirrors the persecution he feels himself about to undergo from the harridan. He says he is,

Troubled with noise, I cannot sleepe; I dreamt
That a strange *furie* entred, now, my house,
And, with the dreadfull tempest of her breath,
Did cleaue my rooфе asunder. (3.4.40-43)

To his dismay, his mention of a dream only provides the occasion for Lady Would-be to launch into her interminable inane and “learned” monologues, in which she woefully misquotes and misapplies classical texts. When Volpone attempts to quiet Lady Would-be by noting that Plato, whom she has been quoting as an authority on “physick,” had written, “your highest female grace is silence,” she responds by enthusiastically taking up the topic of poets, on which she claims to be an authority: “Which o’ your Poets? PETRARCH? / TASSO? or DANTE? / GVERRINI? ARIOSTO? ARETINE? / CICO di Hadria? I haue read them all” (3.4.77-81). Like Gertrude, Lady Would-be is a repository of poetic trivia, but also like Gertrude – and unlike Lucy, the Countess of Bedford – she is an undiscerning reader who seems to not understand or learn from what she reads. She claims that “DANTE is hard,” for example, yet praises the “desparate wit” of the obscene poetry of Aretine (3.4.95-96). Lady Would-be is a parodic satire of the kind of unmeritorious gentlewoman that can result from a society that prizes wealth over virtue, particularly in the distribution of the honors of patronage.

As with his wife, Sir Pol’s virtues are entirely unequal to his rank. As she has come to Venice “for intelligence / Of tyres, and fashions, and behauior,” to acquire facility with the external trappings of gentility, so Sir Pol has come to Venice to study
intrigue and statecraft, but just as Lady Would-be’s internal lack of grace betrays her unworthiness for the social responsibilities appertaining to her rank, so Sir Pol’s utter stupidity and lack of discernment betrays any overtures he makes to holding any meaningful office of state. His plans for projects that will benefit the state, like the policy that only “knowne patriots” be allowed to own tinder boxes or the project for testing incoming ships for plague, are self-evidently ridiculous (4.1.93-108). His diary is even more bathetic, recording such trivial minutiae as buying toothpicks and urinating near St. Mark’s (4.1.135-144).

A particularly illustrative example of Sir Pol’s poor judgment is his attempt to “correct” Peregrine’s low opinion of Venetian mountebanks. Contradicting the latter’s accurate report of them as “quack-saluers, / Fellowes, that liue by venting oyles, and drugs,” Sir Pol staunchly maintains,

They are the onely-knowing men of Europe!
Great generall schollers, excellent physicians,
Most admir’d statesmen, profest fauourites,
And cabinet-counsellors, to the greatest princes!
The onely languag’d-men of all the world! (2.2.5-6, 9-13)

Sir Pol’s having attained the rank of knighthood is so absurd that Peregrine, ironically, asserts that he would scarcely even make a believable parody of a knight as a dramatic character. He says,

. . . O, this Knight
(Were he well knowne) would be a precious thing
To fit our English stage: He that should write
But such a fellow, should be thought to faine
Extremely, if not maliciously.  (2.1.56-60)

The comic inequity between the behavior and the rank of Sir Politic and Lady Would-be is possible because of the over-valuation of wealth in Jacobean culture. Their gentle status is a travesty of the traditional ideals of gentility and thus satirically critiques the cultural association of rank with wealth. The critique of wealth as a means of attaining rank is also a central criticism made by the legacy hunting plot in which Volpone and Mosca dupe the gulls, Volfre, Corbaccio, and Corvino, as well as Lady Would-be.

The legacy hunting plot, which Jonson borrows from Roman precedents in satirists like Petronius and Lucian, is described by Herford and Simpson as “un-English” because it has no historical precedence in early seventeenth century London (2.50). The “un-English” quality of this plot, however, does not stop critics like Knights from seeing it as a satire of a particularly Jacobean English culture of greed. He argues, “Whether ‘fishing for testaments’ was actually one of the contemporary forms of fortune-hunting or not, its significance here is solely as a manifestation of human greed, peculiarly appropriate in the era [seventeenth century] that was then beginning” (201). Much as the setting of the play in commerce-dominated, “republican” Venice allows Jonson to satirize the ways that excessive veneration of wealth undermine cultural values and corrupt social institutions, with particular implications for Jacobean London, so the adaptation of the classical legacy hunting plot allows Jonson to obliquely satirize the corruption of Jacobean patronage by depicting a hyperbolic satire of patronage seeking gift-giving pushed to an absurd extreme.
The parallels between the legacy hunting plot and the Jacobean practice of gift-giving in return for the perquisites of patronage are somewhat striking. Peck’s study describes several instances of Jacobean courtiers, including James himself, accepting gifts or payments in exchange for the distribution of favors or the execution of justice (163-64). Of course, Volpone’s extortion of gifts from the play’s gulls in exchange for empty promises paints him as a patron who is corrupt in the extreme, but the absurd hyperbole is an indirect satiric indictment of the abuses of gift-giving in Jacobean London, where gratuities were increasingly demanded by the nobility in exchange for the favors of patronage; Volpone’s corrupt Venetian “patronage” is a parody of the corruption plaguing Jacobean English patronage.

The similarities between the legacy hunting plot and Jacobean patronage are reinforced by Mosca’s moniker for his master. Throughout the play, Mosca refers to Volpone as “patron.” And, in a sense, this is the role that Volpone enacts throughout a good portion of the play: a corrupt patron soliciting bribes from his suitors, who hope that their gifts will net them the “patronage” of his estate. Volpone as a corrupt patron-par-excellence is not the only – or even the most criticized – object of satire in the legacy plot, though. The patron seekers, Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino, are even more scathingly satirized than their fraudulent patron. The lust for money and the power that comes with it that turns Volpone into a monstrous parody of a patron turns his clients into abject fools, each of whom humiliatingly abandons all semblance of virtuous reputation in their pursuit of the one thing that “maks’t men doe all things” in Venice: money.

The absurdly extreme lust for money that characterizes Volpone’s gulls is encouraged by the deceptive scheming of Volpone’s parasitic servant, Mosca, who
encourages their delusions of riches and greatness with promises that each of them will be the sole heir of Volpone’s hoard of wealth. Mosca’s egging on and his satirically biting asides expose and ridicule the extreme greed and folly of Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino, each of whom vainly imagines that his costly gifts will net him the whole of Volpone’s estate and, thus, all the privileges of the noble status that will come along with it. Mosca recounts the vain imaginings that the lawyer Voltore entertains regarding what his station in life will be when Volpone finally dies:

    I cannot choose [but laugh], sir, when I apprehend
    What thoughts he has . . .
    . . . . . . . . .
    . . . if you dyed to day,
    And gaue him all, what he should be tomorrow;
    What large returne would come of all his venters;
    How he should worship’d be, and reuerenc’d;
    Ride, with his furres, and foot-clothes; waited on
    By herds of fooles, and clients; haue cleere way
    Made for his moyle, as letter’d as himself;
    Be cald the great, and learned Aduocate:
    And then concludes, there’s nought impossible. (1.2.98-109)

The irony in Mosca’s description of Voltore’s unlikely imagined future successes is reminiscent of Carlo Buffone’s sarcastic accounts of the gulls’ foolishness in *Every Man Out of his Humor.*
Voltore’s imaginings show that he is apparently a believer in Volpone’s creed that money can accomplish anything in a commercialized society. He imagines himself rising in Venetian society by the merits of his wealth, once he has inherited Volpone’s fortune. His delusions of future riches and high rank, fed by Mosca’s false promises, lead him to continue foolishly giving lavish gifts to Volpone; his greedy hopes of attaining Volpone’s treasure are so strong that they even lead him to deny the evidence of his own senses that he is being hoodwinked. When, later in the play, he overhears Mosca promising Volpone’s estate to Corbaccio and confronts him for his deception, the clever servant is able to rope him quickly back in with a hastily made up story that his dealing with Corbaccio is a device to net Voltore the older man’s estate as well as his master’s. He assures Voltore,

. . . For your good, I did, sir.

Nay more, I told his sonne, brought, hid him here,
Where he might heare his father passe the deed;
Being perswaded to it, by this thought sir,
That the vnnaturalnesse, first, of the act,
And then, his fathers oft disclaiming in him,
(Which I did mean t’helpe on) would sure enrage him
To doe some violence vpon his parent.
On which the law should take sufficient hold,
And you be stated in a double hope:
Truth be my comfort, and my conscience,
My onely ayme was, to dig you a fortune
Out of these two, old rotten sepulchers – (3.9.27-39)

The prospect of still greater wealth – Corbaccio’s fortunes added to Volpone’s – immediately stifle’s Voltore’s wise skepticism, and he interrupts Mosca’s excuses with an apology: “I cry thee mercy, MOSCA” (3.9.40). Mosca plays upon his foolish credulity to keep him on the line. Voltore’s credulity is pushed to an even more absurd extreme in the last act’s trial before the Venetian Avocatori.

After he learns that he has been cheated by Volpone’s having left his fortune to Mosca upon his supposed death, and after he has been insulted in the street by both Mosca and a disguised Volpone, Voltore decides to come clean to the Avocatori. Just as he is revealing the false witness he has borne against Celia and Bonario, however, Volpone, in disguise, renews the lawyer’s hopes of fortune by whispering in his ear, “Sir, the parasite / Will’d me to tell you, that his master liues; / That you are still the man; your hopes the same; / And this was, onely a iest” (5.12.15-18). Though every faculty of common sense should alert Voltore that this is another device, given that he has twice had evidence that he is being cheated, the credulous lawyer immediately repents his decision to confess, and, spurred on by his renewed hopes of riches, feigns demon possession in order to render void the testimony against Volpone and Mosca that he has just given. Voltore’s desire for wealth and the status that comes with it stifles his capacity for common sense, the natural sense that – if he had any – should produce virtues for which he might be recognized and advanced in a society not so dominated by commercialization and greed. In a very real sense, Voltore sacrifices the virtues which might merit him status and respect in “republican” Venice for the pursuit of the riches that he sees as the
only real “virtue” in commercial Venice, and hence renders himself unworthy of any morally due respect.

If Voltore’s greedy credulity exposes him as truly being the “asse” that Mosca labels him in the opening act, the extremities that he goes to in his attempts to secure the “patronage” of Volpone’s estate are not quite so absurd as those gone to by his rivals, Corbaccio and Corvino. The delusions brought on by the prospect of immense wealth drive each of these two to such perverse extremes as to sin against their own natural obligations to kin in their quest to gain Volpone’s legacy.

Corbaccio’s pursuit of Volpone’s estate is ridiculous in itself; because of his advanced age, he can hardly hope to enjoy the material fruits of the estate, as Voltore imagines himself doing. Moreover, Corbaccio is already a Venetian grandee, and at his age, there should be no question of maintaining a lifestyle of extravagance and luxury. His pursuit of wealth seems to be simply a matter of habit, a result of the ubiquitous culture of greed that dominates commercial Venice, and of which he is a part. Mosca points out the absurdity of Corbaccio’s pursuit of the younger Volpone’s wealth just prior to the old man’s first entrance, introducing him by saying, “Now, shall wee see, / A wretch, who is (indeed) more impotent, / Then this [Volpone] can faine to be; yet hopes to hop / Ouer his graue” (1.4.2-5). Corbaccio’s advanced age sets his pursuit of Volpone’s fortune in the context of a rather perversely comical contest to see who will outlive whom, the “infirm” Volpone or the decrepit Corbaccio. Doubtless an awareness of this is behind Corbaccio’s repeated attempts to get Mosca to administer an “elixir” to Volpone, which would surely determine this contest in Corbaccio’s favor. The old man takes a perverse joy in Mosca’s account of Volpone’s worsening symptoms and displays
a morbidly humorous disappointment when he mishears Mosca and thinks he speaks of Volpone’s health as improving. The question and answer between Corbaccio and Mosca when the former first visits Volpone illustrates his perverse determination to outlive his patron:

CORB. . . .  How do’s his [Volpone’s] apoplexe?
Is that strong on him, still? MOS. Most violent.
His speech is broken, and his eyes are set,
His face drawne longer, then ‘t was wont – CORB. How? how?
Stronger, then he was wont? MOS. No, sir: his face
Drawne longer, then ‘t was wont. CORB. O, good. MOS. His mouth
Is euer gaping, and his eye-lids hang. CORB. Good.
MOS. A freezing numnesse stiffens all his ioynts,
And makes the colour of his flesh like lead. CORB. ‘Tis good.
MOS. His pulse beats slow, and dull. CORB. Good symptoms,
still. (1.4.36-45)

When Mosca finishes describing his master’s dubious sounding symptoms, Corbaccio exclaims delightedly, “Excellent, excellent, sure I shall out-last him: / This makes me yong againe, a score of yeeres” (1.4.55-56). Corbaccio’s greed drives him to a sort of perverse absurdity, which Mosca does nothing to stem.

The morbid determination to “outlast” Volpone and inherit his fortune is not the most perverse extremity that Corbaccio’s greed drives him to, however. Playing on his delusions of being “yong againe,” Mosca convinces Corbaccio to draw up a will disinheriting his son and naming Volpone his heir. In return for this gesture, Mosca
assures Corbaccio, Volpone will name the old man his sole heir, and as Mosca further
notes with satiric irony, Corbaccio will be “certayne, to suruie him . . . / Being so lusty a
man” (1.4.113-14). The disinheriting of his son, Bonario, reveals the complete absurdity
of Corbaccio’s delusions. In spite of his own advanced age and infirmities, he risks the
entire fortune of his only son and heir on the chance that he will outlive Volpone. As
with Voltore, Corbaccio’s greed trumps his reason, which should make him more
cautious in taking care of his son’s inheritance and not hazard it on a bid that one so old
as he will outlive a younger man, however sick he thinks Volpone is.

In the dialogue that accompanies Corbaccio’s departure, most of which he does
not hear, Mosca exposes and ridicules the deluding credulity of the old man brought on
by his anticipation of riches:

CORB. I know thee [Mosca] honest. MOS. You doe lie, sir – CORB.

And –

MOS. Your knowledge is no better then your eares, sir.
CORB. I doe not doubt, to be a father to thee.
MOS. Nor I, to gull my brother of his blessing.
CORB. I may ha’ my youth restor’d to me, why not?
MOS. Your worship is a precious asse – CORB. What say’st thou?
MOS. I doe desire your worship, to make haste, sir.
CORB. ‘Tis done, ‘tis done, I goe. (1.4.125-32)

This exchange not only exposes the absurdity of Corbaccio’s delusions and his credulity;
Mosca’s unheard satiric asides also expose Corbaccio as a fool. Like the gull Stephen in
*Every Man in his Humor*, he is a drum to be played upon (3.2.23-24). Ironically, the son
whom Corbaccio disinherits in his pursuit of wealth is the only character in the play that is explicitly described as possessing merit, in the sense of the traditional virtues of “true” nobility. Mosca calls him, “A sonne so braue, and highly meriting” (1.4.104), and the Avocatori report his reputation as being “Of vn-reproued name” (4.5.4). Regardless of Bonario’s virtuous attributes, however, he is nearly disenfranchised by his father’s hunting for Volpone’s legacy. The implicit critique is that commercialized society, which privileges wealth above merit, actually excludes those whose virtues make them fit for office and rank. Bonario’s exclusion is mirrored in the way that he is more or less excluded from the comedy’s plot. Many critics have remarked upon what an inconsequential character he is in the play. It is useful to remember in regards to Bonario, though, that Jonson’s comic dramaturgy focuses on the exposition of vicious characters. As a character that is neither vicious nor particularly apt as an expositor – he actually has a place (at least potentially) in the social hierarchy11 – Bonario has no real place in the satirically comic plot.

The subversion of considerations of virtue to considerations of wealth is perhaps the most pronounced of all in the case of Corvino’s pursuit of Volpone’s legacy, and the event that most explicitly demonstrates the extent to which gold moves Corvino to the exclusion of all other desires is his offering of his wife, Celia, to Volpone as a “gift” that will win him the patronage of being named sole heir. Corvino is pushed to his greedy extremity, as Voltore and Corbaccio are to theirs, by Mosca’s deceptive scheming. Attempting to engineer a tryst between his master and Celia, Mosca concocts a story, which he relays to Corvino, saying that Volpone has been partially recovered by the oil of Scoto and that all that it needs now to restore him to health is “some yong woman . . . /
Lustie, and full of juice, to sleepe by him” (2.6.34-35). Mosca implies that whoever supplies the young woman will be inscribed as Volpone’s heir, and he then gradually weeds out possible alternative solutions, such as hiring a courtesan, until Corvino realizes that his only recourse is to give his wife to the purpose if he is to win the legacy.

The act of prostituting his wife to the “infirm” Volpone is perverse enough in itself, but the act is made to seem even more so in the play because it goes so directly against Corvino’s psychotically jealous nature. Early in the play, it is established that his seemingly singular greatest passion is his irrational fear of being made a cuckold. Though his neurotic jealousy appears to come from no real love for his wife, Celia – the rather, he seems to view her as an object of his possession – he has, nonetheless, a tremendous and overweening regard for his reputation. Celia may be thought of as his possession, yet he has a keen eye toward his possession’s virtue, which, of course, determines her value. His violent reaction when he spots Celia merely looking out her window at Volpone, disguised as a mountebank, in the immediately preceding scene is so overblown as to make an Othello or a Ferdinand seem rational and trusting. He rails at Celia, who has done nothing to earn his suspicions, promising her,

\[\begin{align*}
\ldots \text{thy restraint, before, was libertie,} \\
\text{To what I now decree: and therefore, marke me.} \\
\text{First, I will haue this bawdy light dam’d vp;} \\
\text{And til ’t be done, some two, or three yards off,} \\
\text{I’le chalke a line: o’re which, if thou but chance} \\
\text{To set thy desp’rate foot; more hell, more horror,} \\
\text{More wilde, remorseless rage shall seize on thee,}
\end{align*}\]
Then on a coniurer, that, had heedlesse left
His circles safetie, ere his deuill was laid.12 (2.5.48-56)

The promise of Volpone’s gold, however, is sufficient to make Corvino deny his jealous nature, as well as his natural obligations, and offer his wife as a gift to his prospective patron. The promise of wealth has such a hold on Corvino, in fact, that he hastily brings Celia to Volpone’s residence early, before Mosca sends for them, for fear that he might be prevented by one of his rivals. Mosca notes the absurd irony of Corvino’s eagerness in a pointed aside: “Preuent? did ere man haste so, for his hornes? / A courtier would not ply it so, for a place” (3.7.4-5). A courtier may not, but Corvino will.

The conflict between Corvino’s honor and his pursuit of riches is repeatedly foregrounded in the argument that ensues between Corvino and Celia when he attempts to offer her to Volpone. Corvino exhorts his wife to “respect [his] venture” (3.7.37). The rhetorical question with which Celia responds reveals the real cost of her husband’s “venture.” “Before your honour?” she asks (3.7.38). In defense of his “venture,” Corvino deconstructs the concept of honor using Machiavellian rhetoric and attempts to convince Celia that, given Volpone’s infirmity, her sleeping with him will be “A pious worke, mere charity, for physick, / And honest politie, to assure mine owne” (3.7.65-66). Celia does not buy his rationalizing, though, nor will Mosca put a pretty face on the act. When the servant announces them to Volpone, he exposes Corvino’s perversity for what it is, saying that the merchant “is come to offer, / Or rather, sir, to prostitute . . . / Freely, vn-ask’d, or vn-intreted . . . / (As the true, feruent instance of his loue)13 / His owne most faire and proper wife” (3.7.74-78).
When Celia continues to resist Corvino’s wishes, the same violence that he had displayed in his jealousy comes forth in his determination to gain wealth through his own cuckolding. Corvino vows that if Celia will not yield and sleep with Volpone, he will

. . . drag thee hence, home, by the haire;

Cry thee a strumpet, through the streets; rip vp
Thy mouth, vnto thine eares; and slit thy nose,
Like a raw rotchet – Do not tempt me, come.
Yield, I am loth – (Death) I will buy some slaeue,\(^{14}\)
Whom I will kill, and binde thee to him, alieue;
And at my windore, hang you forth: deuising
Some monstrous crime, which I, in capitall letters,
Will eate into thy flesh, with \textit{aqua-fortis},
And burning cor’siues, on this stubborne brest. (3.7.96-105)

There is a complete redirection of Corvino’s passion; whereas he had threatened to wall Celia up in a room with no windows and fit her with a chastity belt for merely looking out at a disguised Volpone, now he threatens even greater violence if she will not sleep with him outright.

Corvino’s complete change is not unlike religious repentance, a perverse parody of conversion that is consistent with the idolatrous worship of wealth that opens the play. Celia’s final plaint as Corvino leaves decries the inverted ethics of the idolatrous, money loving culture:

O god, and his good angels! whether, whether
Is shame fled humane breasts that with such ease,
Men dare put off your honours, and their owne?

Is that, which euer was a cause of life,

Now plac’d beneath the basest circumstance?

And modestie an exile made, for money? (3.7.133-38)

Celia’s pleas echo the complaints of Gertrude in *Eastward Ho!* regarding the degeneration of the English knighthood, and they articulate the moral point of the play’s satire. The elevation of wealth to the extent that it is carried in *Volpone*’s Venice results in an amoral culture where traditional virtues are rendered useless, made “exile,” and replaced by wealth as the only source of honor. As in the cases of Corbaccio and Voltore, Corvino’s pursuit of wealth exposes not merely his disinclination towards the virtues that should merit social honor and rank but also his complete abandonment to the pursuit of wealth as the only attribute worth having. These three gulls are depicted as the absurdly greedy products of a culture that prizes wealth as an exclusive attribute of elevated rank.

The legacy hunting plot that exposes the vicious, money-hungry ambitions of the gulls and draws them out to the foolish extremities of their greedy delusions is primarily executed by the machinations of Volpone’s clever servant, Mosca. As in Jonson’s early adaptations of the classical comic paradigm, in *Volpone*, the scheming of the wily servant, the dramatic heir of the Roman clever slave, serves primarily the dramatic end of exposing the follies of the play’s satiric objects. It is Mosca’s deluding promises that egg on the legacy hunters, leading them to part with their possessions in hopes of extravagant wealth. Mosca devises the scheme to get Corbaccio to disinherit his son, and Mosca concocts the plot for his master to cuckold Corvino.\(^{15}\)
Without question, the dramatic emphasis in Mosca’s witty scheming, as with Brainworm’s and Macilente’s, is laid on the satiric exposure of the gulls that it brings about. Moreover, as shown in several places above, Mosca’s biting asides, like those of Carlo Buffone in *Every Man Out of his Humor*, verbally expose and ridicule the gulls’ follies. In addition to the satiric jibes that are peppered throughout the play, Mosca makes very direct indictments of the gulls’ vices in the play’s last act after Volpone has feigned his death and left his estate to Mosca. When the gulls come to Volpone’s, each of them expecting to take hold of his inheritance, they are surprised to find that Mosca has it for himself, and more surprised to find him confront each of them with the behaviors that disqualify their claims to the estate. In this scene, the satiric exposure of vice that is the typical province of the Jonsonian clever servant is so explicit as to border on declamatory preaching, as each of the gulls is in turn confronted with the perversity of his or her greed.

Lady Would-be, who has also entered the contest to win Volpone’s legacy, is the first to be rebuked when she demands that Mosca give her satisfaction. He, instead, reminds her of the shameful offer she has made, apparently to prostitute herself to him, if he would make sure she was the heir. “Madame! . . . ‘pray you, fairely quit my house,” Mosca bids her,

Nay, raise no tempest with your lookes; but, harke you:

Remember, what your ladyship offred me,

To put you in, an heire; goe to, think o’t.

And what you said, eene your best madams did

for maintenance, and, why not you? inough. (5.3.37-43)
After dispatching Lady Would-be, Mosca reminds Corvino of the shameful vices of which he is guilty, vices of which Mosca is well aware, since he put Corvino up to them in the first place. Mosca says to the disappointed Corvino,

Why should you stay, here? with what thought? what promise?

Heare you, doe not you know, I know you an asse?

And, that you would, most faine, haue beene a wittoll,

If fortune would haue let you? that you are

A declar’d cuckold, on good termes? this pearle,

You’ll say, was yours? right: this diamant?

I’le not deny’t, but thanke you. Much here, else?

It may be so. Why, thinke that these good works

May helpe to hide your bad: I’le not betray you,

Although you be but extraordinary,

And haue it onely in title, it sufficeth. (5.3.49-59)

Mosca’s cheeky response to Corvino’s suit not only cheats the merchant of the gifts he has given by means of blackmail, the “virtues” that he has forwarded to recommend him as a fit recipient of Volpone’s “patronage,” but it reminds him – and the audience – of the shameful and wicked behavior his pursuit of the fortune has led him to.

As Mosca confronts Corvino with his shameful prostitution of his wife, so he rebukes Corbaccio with the absurdity of the old man’s ridiculous hopes of outliving Volpone and his unnatural disinheriting of his son:

Are not you he, that filthy couetous wretch,

With the three legges, that here, in hope of prey,
Haue, any time this three yeere, snuft about,
With your most grou’ling nose; and would haue hir’d
Me to the pois’ning of my patron? sir?
Are not you he, that haue, to day, in court,
Profess’d the dis-inheriting of your sonne?
Periur’d your selfe? Go home, and die, and stinke. (5.3.67-74)

While Mosca has no heinous sin of Voltore’s to bring to his attention and send him home with, he does confront the lawyer with his own foolishness by pointing out that he should have known better:

Reuerend sir! good faith, I am greeu’d for you,
That any chance of mine should thus defeate
Your (I must needs say) most deseruing trauels:
But, I protest, sir, it was cast vpon me,
And I could, almost wish to be without it,
But, that the will o’ th’ dead, must be obseru’d. (5.3.82-87)

As a lawyer who deals in quibbles and suits for a living, Voltore should have known better than to trust his fortunes to such a venture, and he is, moreover, faced with the technical legality of Mosca’s inheritance. A legal quibble of which Voltore would no doubt taken advantage, himself, were he in Mosca’s position, disinherits him. Like the other gulls, he has is own greedy folly thrown in his face as the reason for his disappointment.

As is typical in Jonson’s revisions of the classical comic plot, the machinations of Mosca, as a clever servant, in *Volpone* are integral to the play’s satiric exposure of
common social vices, in this case the vices appertaining to a society-wide pathological pursuit of wealth. The development of the servant Mosca as a satiric expositor in the mold of a Brainworm, Macilente, or Buffone is not the only important element of his characterization for the play’s social critique, however. Unlike the servant characters from Jonson’s early comedies, but like Francis Quicksilver in *Eastward Ho!* and Face in *The Alchemist*, Mosca undertakes his duping plots not only for the ends of exposing and ridiculing the gulls or aiding his master’s interests, but ultimately for the sake of his own advancement. Having duped the gulls of their fortunes and been named his master’s sole heir, Mosca determines to enrich himself with the spoils of the schemes by which he has cheated and exposed the gulls. What is more, the scheme by which he intends to make himself rich will also gull his master, Volpone.

After his master leaves him in disguise to torment the gulls they have just dispatched, Mosca muses,

So, now I haue the keies, and am possesst.

Since he [Volpone] will, needes, be dead, afore his time,

I’le burie him, or gaine by him. I’am his heire:

And so will keepe me, till he share at least. (5.5.12-15)

Mosca’s nearly successful attempt to enrich himself at his master’s expense is a further indictment of a greedy society that emphasizes wealth over virtue. Precisely because he comes so close to succeeding in his attempt to dupe his master, the servant, in this play, very nearly usurps the position of the patron; the clever servant almost arises to the position of a gentleman. In this regard, Mosca’s character’s dual inheritance from the Roman clever slave and the seventeenth century English servant is of great importance,
particularly because of the associations of both the literary stock character and the cultural stereotype with craftiness and parasitic behavior.

Mosca’s formal similarities to the classical clever slave are numerous. His schemes that separate gulls from their fortunes and his witty, satiric barbs have already been noted. Though it is a rather perverse revision of the New Comic plot, Mosca’s scheme to cuckold Corvino has much in common with new comedy Romance plots. Even the prevailing methodology by which Mosca dupes his victims, namely feeding their greedy delusions with empty promises, has precedence in Roman comedy, as when the slave Tranio leads on Theopropides in *Mostellaria* by making him believe that his son, Philolaches, has enriched his estate by purchasing the house of his neighbor, Simo, for a good price.

One of Mosca’s actions that is most reminiscent of the Roman clever slave is his mid-play soliloquy lauding his own wit and the success of his machinations. Before the play’s action reaches a catastrophe when Corvino and Celia show up at Volpone’s too early, while Bonario is still there, Mosca revels in how well his plots are going:

I Feare, I shall begin to grow in loue
With my deare selfe, and my most prosp’rous parts,
They doe so spring, and burgeon; I can feele
A whimsy i’ my bloud: (I know not how)
Successse hath made me wanton. (3.1.1-5)

He goes on to rhapsodize on the particular methods of his machinations and the benefits of his dubious station in life:

. . . O! Your Parasite
Is a most precious thing, dropt from above,
Not bred ‘mongst clods, and clot-poules, here on earth.
I muse, the mysterie was not made a science,
It is so liberally profest! . . .

. . . . . . . .
I meane not those, that haue your bare towne-arte,
To know, who’s fit to feede ’hem; . . .

. . . . . . . .
But your fine, elegant rascal, that can rise,
And stoope (almost together) like an arrow;
Shoot through the aire, as nimbly as a starre;
Turne short, as doth a swallow; and be here,
And there, and here, and yonder, all at once;
Present to any humour, all occasion;
And change a visor, swifter, then a thought! (3.1.7-29)

Mosca’s use of the term “parasite” to describe his vocation recalls both Lodge’s description of Terence’s Davus and Harrison’s unflattering description of English serving-men. Both Lodge and Harrison impute an immoral character to the clever slave and English servant, respectively, and Lodge and Sidney, it will be remembered, conceive of the Terentian slave as a decidedly negative moral object lesson particularly because of his parasitism and “craft.” Mosca’s speech here lauds his parasitic deceitfulness as if it were a virtue. It is, after all, very nearly the means of his success and advancement, and his near triumph is, in itself, a critique of a culture that would
allow him to thrive by such means. His praise of the parasite is reminiscent of Quicksilver’s ironically satiric praise of villainy as “the London high-way to thrift” in *Eastward Ho!* (2.2.25). Here, the parallels between Mosca’s Venice and Quicksilver’s London drive home the satiric critique of English veneration of wealth. As with Quicksilver’s London, the overvaluation of wealth – particularly as greater than virtue – in Mosca’s Venice threatens to produce a disordered society from which ethics are entirely absent – to the point that morality itself is inverted and vice becomes virtue.

Mosca’s attempt to enrich himself by his machinations also puts his clever scheming in a condemnatory light. While Mosca’s schemes are not quantitatively more vicious than those of the Roman slaves who are his literary predecessors, the slave manages to escape condemnation for his crimes, as Erich Segal argues, because he does not seek to enrich himself by his own deceptions. Segal notes of Plautine slaves, “In almost every instance, the sum of money for which the clever slave is scheming turns out to be just enough to buy his master’s sweetheart and nothing more. Profit for its own sake is never a factor; gold is merely the means to an end” (60). Mosca’s scheming is not so selfless. Left with Volpone’s fortune as a result of his scheming, he dons the gown of a clarissimo and prates the town as a proud new member of the gentility, and a culture that bestows respect upon the appearance of wealth so habitually is ready to receive him as such.

The injustice of Mosca’s rise is noted bitterly by the characters whom he has gulled in order to achieve his station. Their comments emphasize his humble class origins. They also evoke his dramatic heritage from the classical clever slave in the epithets that they apply to him. Voltore, after Mosca has dismissed him, fumes, “Ovt-
stript thus, by a parasite? a slave? / Would run on errands? and make legs, for crummes?"
(5.7.1-2). Corbaccio takes particular offense at seeing him in the garb of a grandee: “See, in our habit! the impudent varlet!” (5.8.1). The final condemnation of Mosca’s advancement is given, of course, in the verdict of the Avocatori, after his schemes have been discovered, which also puts a sudden halt to his climbing. Their sentence condemns Mosca for both the nature of his schemes and his presumption to place:

\[...
You appeare
T’haue been the chiefest minister, if not plotter,
In all these lewd impostures; and now, lastly,
Haue, with your impudence, abus’d the court,
And habit of a gentleman of Venice,
Being a fellow of no birth, or bloud:
For which, our sentence is, first thou be whipt;
Then liue perpetuall prisoner in our gallies. (5.12.107-114)
\]

The verdict is almost an exact inversion of that which Justice Clement pronounces on Brainworm, when he acquits him on account of the fact that he has been the engineer of the day’s schemes. The difference between Brainworm and Mosca, of course, is that Brainworm, like his Plautine predecessors, doesn’t seek any profit for himself in his deceptions.

The decision of the Avocatori ostensibly condemns Mosca as much for his “impudence” in overstepping appropriate social boundaries as much as it does for the criminal nature of his fraudulent “impostures.” The moral satire of the play, though, is less concerned with the impudent rise of a servant, than with the vicious methods by
which such a rise is brought about, and particularly with the social climate, represented by the Avocatori, that seems entirely ready to overlook those methods, provided that the servant remains in possession of sufficient wealth.

Mosca attains the wealth necessary to enter the upper reaches of Venetian society by fraudulent means that nearly amount to outright theft, yet so long as he is possessed of Volpone’s wealth, he is revered as a grandee, regardless of how he has made his money. Only moments before he is sentenced, for example, the Avocatori threaten to have Volpone, in disguise as a court officer, whipped for not showing Mosca the deference due “Toward a person of his ranke” (5.12.80). One of them even determines to match Mosca with his daughter, on the condition that he remains in possession of Volpone’s inheritance (5.12.50-51). It is indicative of how far the fabled Venetian justice has been corrupted by greed that Mosca is only condemned when Volpone reveals himself to be alive, thus voiding Mosca’s inheritance. The justice of Mosca’s wealth is not measured by the virtue of his character. Rather the “virtue” of his character is judged on the basis of his wealth, with no regard given to how that wealth has been attained.

If Mosca’s vicious schemes, undertaken to enrich himself, are satirized for their fraudulent and criminal nature, then the indictment also falls upon his master, Volpone, as a criminally corrupt patron. Mosca’s solicitation of gifts from the gulls is, after all, undertaken for his master before he decides to extort the entire fortune for himself, and Volpone is completely on board with Mosca’s criminal methods of garnering the gulls’ wealth. Early in the play, immediately after worshipping his vast wealth, Volpone describes, rhapsodically, the ingenious means by which he is able to maintain and add to his massive hoard. He muses,
. . . I glory

More in the cunning purchase of my wealth,

Then in the glad possession; since I gaine

No common way: I vse no trade, no venter;

I wound no earth with plow-shares; fat no beasts

To feed the shambles; haue no mills for yron. (1.1.30-35)

Volpone goes on to disqualify a number of ways of attaining profit, some virtuous and some vicious, before describing he way in which he chooses to make his fortune, which is of course to, by Mosca’s ingenuity, solicit gifts from greedy suitors who hope to inherit his fortune:

This [hope of inheritance] drawes new clients, daily, to my house,

Women, and men, of euery sexe, and age,

That bring me presents, send me plate, coyne, iewels,

With hope, that when I die, (which they expect

Each greedy minute) is shall then returne,

Ten-fold, vpon them. (1.1.76-81)

Though it is the inheritance of his fortune Volpone dangles as a prize in order to solicit gifts from those he gulls, “Letting the cherry knock against their lips, / And, draw[ing] it, by their mouths, and back againe,” the practice of holding out the promise of vast wealth to solicit a fortune from greedy gulls is not dissimilar to the corrupted practice of patronage in Jacobean England wherein many courtiers and nobles solicited “gifts” in return for the promise of office, perquisites, or legal decisions in favor of the clients.
Volpone, thus, presents a thoroughgoing and scathing satire of a culture that excessively venerates wealth, especially to the exclusion of considering virtue in dispensing honor and patronage. The cultural idolizing of money in the Venice of this comedy threatens to produce a moral anarchy wherein those who possess the virtues of nobility, like Bonario, would be suppressed, while those whose facility with fraud and deception makes them rich, like Mosca, rise to power and privilege.

IV

The moral anarchy that the cultural idolizing of money threatens to produce in Volpone in many senses is actualized to form the setting for The Alchemist. The realized threat is in part indicated by the fact that the clever servant in the latter play, Jeremy the butler, has usurped his absent master’s estate and adopted the persona, garb, and rank of a gentleman gallant, one Captain Face, and has thus carried out the entry of a parasitic and fraudulent servant into the upper classes that Mosca threatened.

Cheryl Lynn Ross, in “The Plague of The Alchemist,” reads the presence of the plague in the play as a metaphor for the greedy immorality that rules the play’s society. Ross argues, “From one end of the social scale to the other, from Drugger to Mammon, the characters represent a society suffering a thoroughgoing contagion of immorality. Their absolute selfishness is a symptom of moral sickness that the plague characteristically and unerringly uncovered” (440). She goes on to assert that the particular illness of London society, like Volpone’s Venice, is its widespread greed: “The London peopled by such extreme sensualists and self-servers is no longer a healthy body politic. It is a patient suffering from disease in all its component parts” (440).
Ross’s reading also notes the importance of the plague to the disordered setting of the play in that the presence of plague removes the dominant classes from the city and leaves the “marginal” social elements, represented by Face, Subtle, and Doll Common, in control. She notes,

> When members of the dominant social classes decamped, they delegated household authority to their servants. These temporary aristocrats shared the city with quack doctors who sold unicorn’s horn and patent nostrums guaranteed to cure the disease. The city took on a macabre carnival atmosphere of license, at least for those who were still healthy. (439)

While the departure of the “dominant class,” Lovewit in particular, is indeed a precondition for the play’s chaotic action, and while the elevation of unsettled, marginalized characters into positions of relative power is certainly important for the play’s moral satire, the social critique made by *The Alchemist* seems to be more centered in the similarity that the play implies between the social economics of the dominant class and the marginal class; i.e. the carnivalesque chaos of the plague-time economy is organized according to the same principles as everyday Jacobean London. Specifically, the plague-ridden society ruled by the venture tripartite suffers from the same idolizing of money, appetite for luxurious extravagances, and corrupt patronage that is satirically depicted as characteristic of “dominant class” culture in *Volpone* and *Eastward Ho!.*

The similarity between the vices that are satirized in *The Alchemist* and *Volpone* is shown in both the particular follies of the gulls and the methods of deceit used by the clever servant characters and their partners that expose those follies. Like the gulls in *Volpone*, the gulls in *The Alchemist* are drawn in completely by promises of extravagant
wealth and rapid social advancement. They readily part with the means that they have for the prospect of getting absurdly rich or enjoying ludicrous opulence. And like Volpone and Mosca, the venture tripartite holds forth to their lips the “cherry,” as Volpone calls it, of immense wealth, high rank, and extravagant luxury in order to defraud the gulls of the various, mostly monetary, “gifts” that they bring, hoping therewith to purchase the “patronage” offered by Face and Subtle.

Whereas the source of the money the gulls hope for in *Volpone* is the title character’s vast estate, in *The Alchemist*, the source of the “patronage” dispensed by Face and Subtle is the latter’s practice of alchemy. Alchemy in this play serves as both the source of the promises of wealth made by Face and Subtle and as a metaphor for the personal transformations that these mock-patrons offer to their clients. Partridge argues that Jonson uses the quasi-scientific and magical language of alchemy as a metaphor to critique the “power” of gold in this play in the same way that he uses the rhetoric of religion in *Volpone*. Partridge asserts, “Man himself can be alchemized; money can give a man spirit. In short, the alchemist (Subtle or gold) becomes a parody of the Creator” (127). This kind of transformation of a person is described by Subtle in the play’s opening scene when he argues that it is his art that has raised Face to his current social standing. Subtle claims,

Thou vermine, I haue tane thee, out of dung,
So poore, so wretched, when no liuing thing
Would keepe thee companie, but a spider, or worse?
Rais’d thee from broomes, and dust, and watring pots?
Sublime’d thee, and exalted thee, and fix’d thee
I’ the third region, call’d our state of grace?
Wrought thee to spirit, to quintessence, with paines
Would twise haue won me the philosophers worke?
Put thee in words, and fashion? made thee fit
For more then ordinarie fellowships? (1.1.64-73)

The alchemical language in Subtle’s rhetoric implies that Face’s advanced station is the result of a magical process rather than the result of his new suit of clothes and the mastery of Lovewit’s house. The irreligious and quasi-magical claims to power that Subtle makes here in regards to Face, and throughout the play in regards to other characters, should be self-evidently dubious, but for the gulls, the promises of riches, extravagance, and social advancement that the patronage of the venture tripartite promises are so tempting that they cannot resist purchasing Subtle’s services.

The hyperbolic absurdity of Face and Subtle’s progressively inflated promises of wealth and greatness as a result of the latter’s art are depicted in the “services” they provide for their first two clients, Dapper and Drugger. The former, a lawyer’s clerk, has been persuaded by Face that Subtle can provide for him the simple service of conjuring “a familiar, / To rifle with, at horses, and winne cups” (1.1.192-93). When he actually comes to buy his familiar, however, Subtle is able to dupe him into paying a larger fee by promising that a familiar will do far more for him than help him cheat at the horses or at cups. Subtle warns Face, in Dapper’s hearing, of course, that he, being a gambling gallant himself, is doing himself harm soliciting for Dapper. “Mary,” Subtle warns, “to be so’importunate for one, / That, when he has it, will vn-doe you all: / Hee’ll winne vp all the money i’ the towne” (1.2.75-77). On one hand, the device of upping the ante in
terms of what Subtle will do for Face is, as Ross notes, simply the classic bait-and-switch staple of a con man (452). The larger promise allows Face and Subtle to extort a higher price for the service. The device also, however, exposes the overweening greed of Dapper, as the conversation that follows illustrates:

... FAC. Y’are mistaken, Doctor.

Why, he do’s aske one but for cups, and horses,

a rifling flye: none o’ your great familiars.

DAP. Yes, Captayne, I would haue it, for all games. (1.2.82-85)

Dapper’s greed quickly exceeds the bounds of modesty generally ascribed to one of his social station. Gullibly believing Subtle’s promises of the vast wealth he will win at gaming, Dapper immediately contemplates leaving his position as a clerk and, presumably, joining the leisured gentleman class (1.2.91). His ready greed, typical of the money-revering Jacobean London of Jonson’s middle comedies, taken together with his child-like, foolish gullibility render him completely vulnerable to the swindles of the play’s clever parasites.

If Dapper wants to be a gentleman, Face and Subtle are ready enough to provide him with a pedigree. Face tells Dapper that Subtle has divined that he is “allyed to the queene of Faerie” (1.2.126). As incredible as these assurances seem to be, Dapper is deluded into credulity by hopes of immense wealth and consequent social advancement. He imagines himself becoming so rich that he will become a great patron of the doctor’s practice: “By love, sir, / I’ll winne ten thousand pound, and send you halfe” (1.2.135-36). Though the promises of immense wealth obtained by the improbable means of gambling and the ridiculous claim, which Dapper empirically knows to be false, that he is
related to the Queen of Faery should warn the clerk that he is being conned, his boundless
greed and delusions of grandeur blind his common sense, and he swallows the promises
whole. Quicksilver’s estimation of Gertrude’s greedy credulity could as easily apply to
Dapper’s credulous belief of Face and Subtle: “It goes downe without chewing y’faith”
(3.2.173).

Notably, Dapper readily associates his favorable relation to the Queen of Faery
with the material riches and wealth of courtly Jacobean culture. As Marjorie Swann has
demonstrated in “The Politics of Fairylore in Early Modern English Culture,” this
patching of native fairylore onto the “conspicuous consumption” habits of the Jacobean
court was rather typical in fairy rhetoric at this time. Swann notes, for instance, that
Shakespeare’s description of Queen Mab’s coach in *Romeo and Juliet* as an example of
the way that fairies became associated specifically with urban and courtly “financial
gain” as opposed to modest, domestic “windfall” of coins at this time in England (457).
Swann argues, “By emphasizing Mab’s coach, Shakespeare firmly associates his fairy
queen with a new cultural phenomenon spawned by changing social and economic
conditions: conspicuous consumption” (457). The spread of cultural belief that fairies
could make one conspicuously rich led to fairylore’s use as a pretext for con operations
like the one run by the venture tripartite. Swann draws attention to the cases of a 1595
London woman who “gull[ed] clients who paid to meet the Queen of Fairies” and the
1610 swindle organized by Sir Anthony Ashley and his brother who proposed to marry a
“rich young dupe” to the queen of fairies as historical inspirations for the con of Face and
Subtle (454). She asserts,
These incidents of early modern con-artistry suggest that fairy beliefs were still tenable well into the seventeenth century; more importantly . . . the gulls in these confidence games demonstrate how one might attempt to superimpose the precapitalist economic relations implicit in traditional fairylore on a market society. Dapper and his ilk misunderstand the structure of commercial exchange: they commodify the traditional interaction of the fairies and humans by attempting to buy the favor of the Fairy Queen, yet they also persist in conceptualizing financial gain not as the product of market relations but as the result of ingratiating oneself with evil spirits. (454)

This misunderstanding, which Dapper suffers from, is the kind of gullibility that allows for the exploitation by the venture tripartite.

Face and Subtle promise the same sort of transformation to Abel Drugger, the tobacconist, who, like Dapper, is drawn to Face and Subtle in hopes of securing a rather modest service, which is to learn from Subtle’s “necromancie” the most propitious way to arrange his shop in order to “thriue” (1.3.11,13). Subtle helps with his modest request, but as with Dapper, also tempts him with hopes of much greater things, telling Face, in Drugger’s hearing, what he prognosticates for him: “This fellow, Captaine, / Will come, in time, to be a great distiller, / And giue a say (I will not say directly, / But very faire) at the philosophers stone” (1.3.77-80). As Face and Subtle’s assurances of wealth eventually lead Dapper to delusions of gentility, so the two con men eventually convince Drugger that he, too, will be a gentleman and thus able to become even richer by

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marriage to the wealthy young widow, Dame Pliant, whose brother will not allow her to wed anyone below a knight (2.6.50-55).

Face’s feeding Drurger’s delusions of marriage to Dame Pliant, of course, is designed to trick him into getting her into his and Subtle’s company, so that one of them can marry her and take her riches for himself. When Drurger succeeds in bringing Pliant’s brother, Kastril, instead, Face continues to offer deluding promises of Subtle’s powers of alchemizing persons, proffering the doctor’s services in teaching Kastril to bear himself like a city gallant and in matching Pliant with a Spanish Count. Among Face’s offers to Kastril is a guarantee that Subtle’s methods will bring to him great wealth by gambling, which he notes as the proper province of a young gallant. As proof, he cites the inflated but certain fortunes of Dapper, who is conveniently at their house to receive his familiar:

. . . Here’s a yong gentleman,

Is borne to nothing, fortie markes a yeere,

Which I count nothing. H’is to be initiated,

And haue a flye o’ the Doctor. He will winne you

By vnresistable lucke, within this fortnight,

Inough to buy a baronie.\textsuperscript{16} They will set him

Vpmost, at the Groome-porters, all the Christmasse!

And, for the whole yeere through, at eueri place,

Where there is play, present him with the chaire;

The best attendance, the best drinke, sometimes

Two glasses of canarie, and pay nothing. (3.4.55-65)
When Kastril expresses a common sense skepticism in doubting the certitude of these extravagant claims, asking, “Doe you not gull one?” Face responds by asserting that these good fortunes could befall anyone lucky enough to get the opportunity to buy the doctor’s services:

. . . ‘Ods my life! Do you thinke it?
You shall haue a cast commander, (can but get
In credit with a glouer, or a spurrier,
For some two paire, of eithers ware, afore-hand)
Will, by most swift posts, dealing with him,
Arriue at competent means, to keepe himselfe,
His punke, and naked boy, in excellent fashion.
And be admir’d for’t.  (3.4.75-82)

If the implausibility of the promises and their origin in forbidden and irreligious arts weren’t indicative enough of an immoral and greedy society, the dubiously sensuous nature of the pleasures, such as a prostitute and a boy kept for sexual pleasure, that Face advances here as benefits of the doctor’s transformations signal the sordid nature of the venture tripartite’s patronage. The sensual extravagance of these offered benefits, though, are still nowhere near so lavish as the delights imagined by the already wealthy Epicure Mammon. The similarity between the perverse extravagance of Mammon’s imagined pleasures and the sordidly carnal promises of Face to Kastril is important in establishing the parallel that the play draws between a criminal underbelly, represented by the venture, and official court culture, represented by the knight, Sir Epicure Mammon. The carnality of Face might be dismissed as the perversity of a sub-culture,
but that it appeals to one young gallant, Kastril, and is mirrored in the desires of an older knight, Mammon.

Mammon’s imaginings of the material delights he will enjoy as a result of his possessing the philosopher’s stone, which Subtle is crafting for him, are so sensuously lavish that they make Face’s assurances to Dapper look positively Puritan. He muses,

I will haue all my beds, blowne vp; not stuft:
Downe is too hard. And then, min oual roome,
Fill’d with such pictures, as TIBERIVS tooke
From ELEPHANTIS: and dull ARETINE
But coldly imitated. Then, my glasses,
Cut in more subtil angles, to disperse,
And multiply the figures, as I walke
Naked betweene my succubæ. My mists
I’le haue of perfume, vapor’d ‘bout the roome,
To loose our selues in; and my baths, like pits
To fall into: from whence, we will come forth,
And rowle vs drie in gossamour, and roses. (2.2.41-52)

Mammon’s dreams are not only of material riches, though. He also imagines himself as becoming a great patron and benefactor of his country, resolving even “to fright the plague / Out o’ the kingdome, in three months” (2.1.69-70). Of course, not all of Mammon’s planned philanthropic adventures would be as beneficent to the kingdom as his plan to rid it of the plague. He also plans to enrich his young gallant friends, thus ridding them of their “idolatry” of money, which, he asserts, arises out of their deep debt,
and also plans to cure the pox (2.1.15-24). The satiric barb against Mammon’s immorality in these plans, of course, is that his elimination of the deterrents of debt and venereal disease would drastically increase the already immoral culture of gambling and whoring among the young gentlemen of London.

Mammon’s overtures to patronage indicate that, like Dapper and Dragger, he is not only seeking to get rich as a result of Subtle’s art but also climb the ladder of the English social hierarchy. By all appearances, Mammon is already a wealthy member of the gentility. The list of the “Persons of the Play” names him a knight, and he certainly doles out money like he has it to spare. But Mammon seeks to advance to an even higher level of privilege and power. As far as his class exceeds that of Dragger and Dapper, so far do his ambitious delusions of grandeur exceed theirs. In addition to buying for himself the most exotic and expensive luxuries, he plans to essentially buy people as well, to put them to whatever task he wishes. He says,

... I’ll ha’ no bawds,

But fathers, and mothers. They will do it best.

Best of all others. And, my flatterers

Shall be the pure, and grauest of Diuines,

That I can get for money. My mere fooles,

Eloquent burgesses, and then my poets,

The same that writ so subtly of the fart,

Whom I will entertaine, still, for that subject. (2.2.57-64)

Mammon’s delusions of cultural autocracy and absolute prerogative include the ability to command the populace and determine the values and tastes of culture, and the delicacies
that he envisions himself enjoying are more extravagant than what would be available to even the highest ranking elites in England. The extent of his delusions of power and influence are displayed when, in romancing Doll, he claims that he will make her fame such that “when [her] name is mention’d / Queenes may looke pale” (4.1.143-44). Doll rightly observes that Mammon’s ambitions will make him a rival for the king himself. She warns,

\[
\text{The Prince will soone take notice; and both seize}
\]

\[
\text{You, and your stone: it being a wealth vnfit}
\]

\[
\text{For any priuate subject. (4.1.148-150)}
\]

Doll’s warning, like that of Mildred to her sister, Gertrude, in *Eastward Ho!* is essentially a warning that Mammon will get himself in trouble by exceeding the natural boundaries of his station and place. Mammon’s response, that he will purchase a private kingdom for himself and Doll, reflects his conviction that sufficient wealth makes one a law unto himself. Mammon’s ethical code is a comically perverse economic version of the “might makes right” ethic. The same conviction is reflected in the assertions noted above, in which he contemplates total autonomy over other people. In almost all of these assertions, he plans to set individuals to tasks that are entirely unnatural to them: parents prostituting their children, preachers flattering rather than reproving, aldermen acting as personal fools, poets concentrating their art on the bathetic, etc. Of course, much of the implied critique in Mammon’s assertions is that this sort of unnaturalness is actually characteristic of real seventeenth century Jacobean society. This kind of unnatural immorality is depicted as the unfortunate and inevitable result of a culture that sets such high store in personal wealth.
The immoral subordination of personal virtues to personal wealth is perhaps most directly lampooned in the characterization of the play’s Puritans, Ananias and Tribulation Wholesome. The portrayal of the Puritans as primarily concerned with money is apparent, not only in that they are, like Mammon, attempting to purchase from Subtle the philosopher’s stone, but also in their shrewd and business like characters. In the deacon Ananias’s first appearance on stage, for instance, he introduces himself to Subtle as, “a servant of the exil’d Brethren, / That deale with widdowes, and with orphannes goods; / And make a iust account, vnto the Saints” (2.5.46-48). Ananias’s description of his office as a deacon is a mercantile perversion of the biblical duties of the office. The office of a deacon, established in Acts 6:1-6, is defined as overseeing the care of widows and orphans in the congregation. The epistle of James describes the ministry to widows and orphans as “visit[ing] the fatherless and widows in their affliction” (1:27). Ananias has commercialized his office, though, to the point that rather than actively ministering to the needs of widows and orphans, he deals in the buying and selling of their “goods.” In Ananias’s congregation, commercial motives and moral virtue have become so tangled that, in the market of widows’ and orphans’ goods, the price of the goods is determined according to the “righteousness” of the previous owners. Ananias reveals this when negotiating for Mammon’s andirons, which, of course, Subtle tells him belonged to orphans:

... ANA. Were the orphanes parents

Sincere professors? SVB. Why doe you aske? ANA. Because

We then are to deale iustly, and giue (in truth)

Their vtmost valew. SVB. ‘Slid, you’ld cossen, else,
And if their parents were not of the faithfull? (2.5.56-60)

Subtle’s question reveals that the Puritans will even stoop to cheating when dealing with people outside their sect, thus showing the extent to which they have, like the more secular characters in Jonson’s middle comedies, suborned all other considerations of virtue to considerations of profit.

The depiction of the religiously scrupulous Puritans in The Alchemist portrays them as being just as idolatrous in their pursuit of wealth and the power it brings as any of the other characters. In fact, as Subtle is giving his pitch to Tribulation Wholesome, the pastor of Ananias’s congregation, he ironically imputes a worldly motive to their separatist scruples, arguing that they adopt their sanctimonious bearing and rhetoric “to winne widdowes / To giue you legacies; or make zealous wiues / to rob their husbands, for the common cause” (3.2.69-71). These methods of propagating the cause, he asserts, will become unnecessary when they have the philosopher’s stone. As Face does for Dapper and Drugger, Subtle paints for Tribulation a picture of the prosperity that the brethren will enjoy along with the wealth that comes from his arts:

. . . [With the wealth from the stone] You cannot
But raise you friends. Withall, to be of power
To pay an armie, in the field, to buy
The king of France, out of his realms; or Spaine,
Out of his Indies: What can you not doe,
Against lords spiritual, or temporall,
That shall oppose you? (3.2.45-51)
Tribulation is entirely seduced by the delusions of worldly wealth and power and, like Mammon, entertains thoughts of material prosperity that are utterly contrary to the values of his profession of faith. He responds, “Verily, ‘tis true. / We may be temporall lords, our selues, I take it” (3.2.51-52). He is so carried away with the promise of wealth and power that he overrides all of Ananias’s moral objections to their dealing with the alchemist Subtle, and eventually even convinces his congregation of the legality of counterfeiting money in order to finance Subtle’s work (4.7.43). Tribulation sums up his subversion of his moral scruples to profit motive when, accompanying Ananias on the way to visit Subtle, he answers the deacon’s reservations about their working with a sorcerer by saying, “Good Brother, we must bend vnto all meanes, / That may giue furtherance, to the holy cause” (3.1.11-12). The “furtherance” that Tribulation has in mind is, of course, the vast monetary profit that the stone will net them. Thus, in the London society depicted in *The Alchemist*, even the portion of society that professes to be the least concerned with material wealth is idolatrous in its elevation of money over virtue.

As in *Volpone* and *Eastward Ho!*, the satire of the gulls in *The Alchemist* critiques a London society that idolizes wealth, primarily because it has become the primary criterion for determining social rank. Within this larger context, the commercialization of patronage and the inflation of honors under James’s administration form a key backdrop to the seemingly absurd hopes of riches and advancement on the part of the play’s dupes. Face alludes to this phenomenon of the sudden increase in honors and titles in Jacobean London when trying to convince Drugger that Subtle’s arts will make him a knight: “What, and dost though despaire [of knighthood], my little NAB, / Knowing, what the
Doctor has set downe for thee, / And, seeing so many, o’ the citie, dub’d?” (2.6.52-54).

Related to the elevation of wealth as an attribute of gentility and the inflation of honors, the play also critiques the extravagant getting and spending of the seventeenth century English gentle classes. As do almost all of the gulls who aspire to the gentility in Jonsonian comedy, the gulls in *The Alchemist* conceive of the higher class only in terms of the extravagant lifestyle that it entails, and as Mammon prominently demonstrates, this conception is derived primarily from the consumptive behaviors of the gentility itself.

As the gulls embody the greedy, ambitious and consumptive vices that are satirized in this play, so their exposure and ridicule is accomplished by the schemes of the clever servant and his cohorts, the other members of the venture tripartite. Though Subtle and Doll are not servants, per se, they are of the same “masterless” underclass that servants, such as Face, are. As the previous chapter noted, the same subversive character was ascribed to servants, apprentices, and the non-laboring – or at least not officially laboring – poor, the latter of which would include charlatans like Subtle and prostitutes like Doll. In *The Alchemist*, as in his previous comedies, Jonson makes use of the subversive nature that was historically ascribed to this social type in the development of Face, Subtle, and, to a lesser extent, Doll, as satiric expositors.

The schemes that dupe the gulls out of their money are, like Mosca’s master scheme of the legacy hunt, the primary means of exposing the greed and folly of Dapper, Drurger, Mammon, and the like. The venture tripartite’s scheme exposes Mammon’s lust and greed explicitly and directly when they confront him with his own vices as the reason for the frustration of his hopes. When Subtle “catches” Mammon with Doll, he cites the knight’s impure lust as the reason for the retardation of the stone’s progress, and
when Face reports that the whole experiment is blown up, Subtle exclaims, “O, the curst fruits of vice, and lust!” to which Mammon responds, “Good father, / It was my sinne. Forgive it” (4.5.77-78). Bereft of the money and kitchenware that he has contributed to the project, Mammon is left to conclude, “O my voluptuous mind! I am justly punish’d” (4.5.74).

While Mammon’s sins of greed and lust are explicitly exposed and confessed, much of the satiric exposure in this play of the gulls as entirely unfit for the gentry is much less stark and explicit. A good deal of the satire of the gulls in The Alchemist hearkens back to the relatively mild and humorous satire of Every Man in his Humor. In executing this satire, Face and Subtle play upon the foolishness of play’s gulls with the same comic irony which Brainworm, Ed Knowell, and Wellbred as well as Carlo Buffone and Macilente ridiculed the gulls in the early humors comedies. The absurd sign that Subtle devises for Abel Drugger’s shop, for instance, is reminiscent of Sogliardo’s ridiculous coat of arms. Subtle’s design for Drugger’s signe “will have his name / Form’d in some mystick character” (2.6.14-15). The supposed mystical power of the sign is revealed as a ridiculous falsehood, however, in the absurdity of its very description:

. . . He first shall have a bell, that’s ABEL;

And, by it, standing one, whose name is DEE,

In a rugg gowne; there’s D. and Rug, that’s DRVG:

And, right anenst him, a Dog snarling Er;

There’s DRVGGGER, ABEL DRVGGGER. That’s his signe.

And here’s now mysterie, and hieroglyphick! (2.6.19-24)
That Dragger thanks Subtle for this farce is a clear revelation of his undiscerning foolishness and unfitness for higher title or office. Face’s comments to Subtle and Doll, after they have sent Dragger off with hopes of knighthood, reveal just how silly the prospect of Dragger as a knight of the realm truly is. Face describes him as “A miserable rogue, and liues with cheese, and has the wormes” (2.6.81-82). His comments completely deflate the blown-up promises of gentility that the tobacconist foolishly entertains.

The devices of the venture tripartite bring about the exposure of other would-be gallants as well. The young gentleman Kastril’s lack of judgment is hilariously revealed when Face sets him upon Surly, who is in the act of trying to actually aid the impetuous youth by outing the con operation of the venture, as an opportunity to practice quarrelling (4.7.1-3). Dapper’s foolish credulity is stretched to the limits of believability when Face and Subtle blindfold, bind, and gag him then stuff him away in a privy, all of which he is told is necessary to facilitate his meeting with the Queen of Faery (3.5.63-81). The playing upon these gulls reveals the absurdity of their pretensions to higher rank, even if they were able to acquire the monetary prowess that Face and Subtle promise them. Their absurd and pretentious hopes of elevated social status and extravagant wealth by means of alchemy stand in contrast to the more mundane hopes of prosperity that they might have by vocations that Jonson seems to view as more appropriate to their station. Dragger is an instructive example in this regard. Face, in introducing him to Subtle, describes him as,

... an honest fellow,

He lets me haue good tobacco, and he do’s not
Sophisticate it, with sack-lees, or oyle,
Nor washes it in muscadell, and graines,
Nor buries it, in grauell, vnder ground,
Wrap’d vp in greasie leather, or piss’d clouts:
But keeps it in fine lilly-pots, that open’d,
Smell like conserue of roses, or french beanes. (1.3.22-29)

Though absurd as a prospective knight, Drugger is exemplary as an honest, plain-dealing shopkeeper. The tobacconist utterly lacks the necessary intelligence or even the requisite appearance – he has worms – to be a gentleman serviceable to the state, but he is possessed of very serviceable merit as a tobacconist. He is a naturally gifted craftsman and merchant, but would make a terrible knight.

As the example of Drugger indicates, though, the characters that populate the London of *The Alchemist* eschew this “natural” sort of thriving for more exotic means of getting rich quickly. The rapid accumulation of wealth is their exclusive common motivation. As Ross notes, even in the context of plague-infested London – “the sicknesse hot,” as The Argument of the play describes it – the characters who seek the benefits of alchemy are not looking to ward off disease. “Most of the characters who approach the alchemist,” Ross observes, “are anxious for profit rather than cure” (440). The excessive mania for wealth and the honor it demands is punished in this play, as it is in *Volpone* and *Eastward Ho!*, with the humiliation of the characters who are dominated by their inappropriate greed and ambition. Rather than reaping the imagined fruits of their extravagant desires, they find that their greedy ambitions expose them for the ridiculous gulls that they are.
This principle is shown in the last act where Lovewit refuses the characters’ claims to have their goods returned unless they can verify that they were cheated of them, thus publicly proclaiming their gullibility. Lovewit’s response to Mammon’s claim to his andirons and kitchenware, for instance, forces him to either admit his own foolishness or forgo his goods. Lovewit says Mammon shall have the right to retake his possessions,

By order of law, sir, but not otherwise.

MAM. Not mine owne stuffe? LOV. Sir, I can take no knowledge,

That they are yours, but by publique meanes.

If you can bring certificate, that you were gull’d of ‘hem,

Or any formall write, out of a court,

That you did cossen your selfe: I will not hold them.

MAM. I’ll rather loose ‘hem. LOV. That you shall not, sir,

By me, in troth. Vpon these termes they’are yours.

What should they ha’ beene, sir, turn’d into gold all? (5.5.65-73)

Lovewit’s bitingly sarcastic question at the end of this exchange points out the ridiculous credulity that Mammon will have to admit to if he wants to recover his losses. This sort of shaming, the play argues, is the result of a cultural mania for quickly gained wealth and rapid advancement. Like Gertrude Touchstone, and the gulls in Volpone, the gulls in The Alchemist, in their tunnel-visioned pursuit of wealth, are shown to be nothing more than instruments upon which parasitic clever servants play.

While the play’s gulls are depicted as being the victims of their involvement in the Jacobean culture’s apotheosizing of wealth and its mania for social advancement and consumption of luxuries, the parasitic and criminal element, represented by the venture
tripartite, the “Cos’ners at large,” thrives (The Argument 6). By feeding the delusions of grandeur in their victims, Face, Subtle, and Doll are able to fleece them of their money hand over fist. Face describes their daily take so far near the midpoint of the play:

Why, this’s a lucky day! Ten pounds of MAMMON!

Three o’ my Clarke! A portague o’ my grocer!

This [hundred marks] o’ the Brethren! beside reuersions,

And states, to come i’ the widdow, and my Count! (3.3.27-30)

As Mosca and Volpone take in a fortune from their gulls in soliciting gifts for the promise of inheritance, so the venture tripartite gets rich off of the promises of great wealth gained by magic. Both means of thriving are patently fraudulent and criminal. Again, Quicksilver’s credo holds true, that villainy is indeed the “London high-way to thrift” – or at least it is in the London of Jonson’s middle comedies.

As in Volpone, the thriving of the parasitic servant in The Alchemist nearly succeeds in ensconcing himself in the gentleman class. Of course, the entire venture poses as gentility or its equivalent through the balance of the play, but the clever servant Face, like Mosca, nearly succeeds in rising to a permanent position of gentility. Before he is forced to disclose the con operation to his early-returned master, Lovewit, Face dupes Subtle for the right to marry Dame Pliant. Having sent for the parson and the Spanish costume needed to pull off the ruse, it is only the surprising return of Lovewit that keeps Face from a successful marriage into the gentility and means. Here again, Face is like Mosca, who is nearly matched with the Avocatore’s daughter. The near marriages of Face and Mosca are a jarring social critique not only because they would place them irrevocably among the gentility, but because of the extreme breach of social
decorum that a marriage of a servant and a lady would imply. In fact, as Patricia Fumerton notes, English servants of the time were discouraged from marrying altogether (17).

The real social criticism implied in Face’s near marriage and entry into the upper classes though, as in Mosca’s, is not so much the criticism of a breach in class decorum, but an indictment of a culture that allows for the advancement of a character by criminally fraudulent means. Face, like Mosca, has much in common with the clever slaves of classical comedy. He uses wit and deception to expose and dupe gulls and separate them from their money, but, again like Mosca, he keeps the money for himself and attempts to rise in power and privilege by those ill-gotten means.

Unlike Mosca, Face is not punished so severely for his actions in the resolution of *The Alchemist*, because rather than trying to double-cross his master, as Mosca does, Face admits his schemes to Lovewit and offers to turn them to his master’s profit. When the gulls return to the house demanding satisfaction, Face realizes that he will not be able to maintain his ruse long enough to consummate his marriage and get away with his pilfered loot, so he sues for peace with Lovewit:

Sir, you were wont to affect mirth, and wit:

(But here’s no place to talke on’t i’ the street.)

Giue me but leaue, to make the best of my fortune,

And onely pardon me th’abuse of your house:

It’s all I begge. I’ll helpe you to a widow,

In recompense, that you shall gi’ me thankes for,

Will make you seuen yeeres yonger, and a rich one. (5.3.80-86)
Face drops his fraudulent subterfuge and, with it, his affected social pose, returning to Jeremy the butler.

In the context of the plot, this return to his proper station allows him to escape condemnation by concocting the story that he had let the house out to strangers (the venture tripartite), who have fled the scene, leaving nobody to stand accountable for the con operation he has run with Subtle and Doll. With regards to the comic structure of the play, Face’s return to Jeremy paves the way for the neoclassical comic resolution of *The Alchemist*. In this resolution, the clever servant Jeremy, by his deceits and devices, ultimately helps his master to consummate a romantic affair and gain a fortune, and along the way, his duping machinations have separated foolish and vicious gulls from their money and implicitly exposed their follies and vices to comic ridicule.

Face’s return to the role of a servant also allows for Lovewit to assume the role of authority in the comedy’s final act, an assumption which is equally important for the comic resolution of the play. Lovewit is perhaps the only character in any of the middle comedies under analysis here who is, arguably, a fittingly meritorious gentleman. That Lovewit is gentility, or at least its equivalent, is implied by his ownership of the house, employment of a servant, and his sufficient means to escape the city during plague time. Lovewit’s financial standing is not the only qualification for his gentility, however, for this would neither separate him from Mammon nor any of the gulls in *Volpone*. He has apparently served in the military; he describes himself as “an old Hargubuzier” (5.5.56). He may have thus risen in class as a result of military service, which would imply that, like Sir Henry Cary, praised in Epigram LXVI, he has earned his honors through the most time-honored means possible in the traditional model of patronage: martial valor.
Lovewit actually displays a certain martial valor in challenging Kastril’s attempt to reclaim his sister, and his bravery wins the respect of the young gallant. These elements of his character imply that, unlike Captain Bobadil or Captain Shift, Lovewit’s martial valor is real, not fraudulent.

In addition to martial prowess, Lovewit also displays a sort of civic leadership. In the first scene of the last act, his interaction with his neighbors portrays him as a head of the community, rather like Justice Clement in *Every Man in his Humor*. Admittedly, he has fled the city during plague-time, but this fact does not necessarily speak ill of him, as any who could afford to – including Jonson himself – fled London at times of plague. Though he is an urban gentleman, Lovewit, in this regard, is somewhat like a feudal lord, enacting a measure of responsibility for his “tenants.” Tellingly, the conversation with his lower-classed neighbors indicates that their respect for Lovewit does not arise out of a habit of ostentatious showiness on his part or his engaging in conspicuous consumption; their descriptions of his house having been “another Pimlico” in his absence are notable because his house has *not* been habitually the scene of extravagant partying while he was in residence (5.1.6). Finally, Lovewit’s name implies a sagacious propensity to patronize wit. As Face says, he is “wont to affect mirth, and wit” (5.3.78). In this regard, Lovewit is akin to Lucy, Jonson’s ideal of nobility, and also young Edward Knowell, Jonson’s exemplary young gentleman from *Every Man in his Humor*, who is also helped to a felicitous marriage by his clever servant.

The assumption of the roles of authority and service by Lovewit and Face respectively are portrayed as setting this society that started in immoral anarchy back to order. The illness of greedy ambition, represented metaphorically by the plague, is
expunged and replaced by what is depicted as a healthy social order. Authority and prosperity are bestowed on a meritorious gentleman; the clever servant’s antics are turned towards the service of his worthy master; the gulls are ridiculed for their credulous greed; and the fraudulent criminals are exiled back to the margins. This exile of the frauds includes Face, who, though he is not punished per se, does have to forego his affected pose of a captain and his marriage, and return to the role of the servant Jeremy. Though the justice of the gulls’ losing their possessions might seem a bit harsh, it is typical of Jonson’s satiric adaptation of the classical comic paradigm and is depicted as necessary in order to bring them out of their humors. Consistent with the kind of “justice” that typically closes Jonsonian comedy, the vicious and foolish are stripped of their pretensions while the virtuous – insofar as there are any – are rewarded.

In typical New Comic fashion, the last word in The Alchemist is given to the clever servant, who addresses the audience and solicits their approval of his witty machinations and their ultimately felicitous outcome. In making this appeal, Face explicitly notes the rearranging of roles in the play’s resolution, particularly his own reassumption of his proper place. He says, “My part a little fell in this last Scene, / Yet ’twas decorum” (5.5.158-59). “Decorum,” as Jonson means it here refers, of course, to the servant’s role within the comic paradigm, but it also implies a “proper” reordering of the social structure, organized according to merit rather than wealth.
Linda Levy Peck’s study of the corruption of court patronage in late sixteenth and early seventeenth century England paints a picture of an avaricious chaos ruling the day in the relations between patrons and clients under Jacobean administration. Peck writes,

The process by which grants were procured and signified in the early Jacobean period was incoherent. . . . the process was actually in flux and the signet books graphically show how confused the process of patronage was at the beginning of James’s reign. Indeed, more than fifty different people signified grants during the twenty-two years of James’s reign. (42)

She goes on to show that this relative decentralization and confusion of the patronage system paved the way for a multiplicity of abuses, such as solicitation of gifts and exorbitant kickbacks in return for offices and titles. Peck cites the abuses that were alleged in the 1619 trial in Star Chamber of James’s Lord Treasurer, Thomas Howard, Earl of Suffolk, whom Jonson had regretfully praised in the epigram cited above, as a particularly egregious example of the graft that was the norm for Jacobean administration of patronage. Peck notes,

The Suffolks and Bingley [Suffolk’s agent] were accused of “bargaining, delaying, persuading, threatening, etc. saying no door could be opened without a golden key.” The countess esteemed “no friends but money” and made “my Lord’s house a snare for the subject.” The Countess took a central role in the arrangement of the kickbacks. . . . The Countess of Suffolk and Bingley required merchants, customs farmers, courtiers, and citizens granted pensions or favors from the king to kickback to them between 5 per cent and 15 per cent of the value of the grant. If 1-10 per
cent was the usual douceur, 15 per cent must have seemed avaricious. The specific practices of which Suffolk stood accused included falsifying the books in the Ordnance office and Exchequer, misemploying the king’s treasure, withholding of funds intended for the king’s service in Ireland, and pervasive extortion. (182)

The culture of greed and avarice at the top levels of English culture trickled down to the lower orders as well. As James prophesied in Basilikon Doron, “every one of the people will delight to follow the example of any of the Courteours, as well in evill as in good” (46). As the commercialization of patronage inevitably resulted in the emergence of personal wealth as an exclusive qualification for social advancement in Jacobean England, so English culture progressively came to prize wealth as a virtue rather than virtue itself. This, at least, is the indictment made by Jonson’s middle comedies, which harshly lampoon the culture of avarice that is depicted as dominating the social order. The corrupted “patronage” of Volpone and Mosca satirically mirror the kind of extortion undertaken by Jacobean patrons like Suffolk and his agent Bingley.

Jonson’s middle comedies argue unequivocally that the elevation of wealth over virtue as a criterion for assigning place results in a moral anarchy like the ones threatened in Volpone and The Alchemist. In the resultant moral anarchy, the clever servant thrives, using his traditionally parasitic and deceitful devices to prey on the overweening greed of the gulls. However, the culture of corruption in these comedies extends to the servants themselves, and, lured by the permeability of class boundaries that are an effect of the commercialization of patronage, the servant characters of the middle comedies turn their
deceitful machinations to the ends of their own profit and seek to breach the gentility themselves.

The self-centered motives of Quicksilver, Mosca, and Face represent a stark shift in Jonson’s development of the clever servant figure, a shift which reflects the shift in the moral satire of the comedies. As the middle comedies critique the pervasive culture of greed in Jacobean London, so their clever servants become inundated with the mania for greed and advancement themselves. Given the dubiously moral character that was ascribed to both the Roman slaves and the stereotyped English servants and apprentices from which Jonson drew his servant characters, their skill in navigating the corrupt seas of English patronage is, in itself, an indictment of the system’s moral virtue.

1 Of course, not all classical slaves are parasites, technically speaking. The parasite is its own specific character type. Clever slaves, as Terence’s Davus, however, could be parasites as well, and the clever slave has much in common with the parasite in terms of his scheming and craft.

2 Alvin Kernan’s study of Renaissance English formal and dramatic satire, The Cankered Muse, describes the darker side of a satirist that is a necessary result of the satirist’s implication in the culture he exposes and critiques. Kernan argues,

There is always, however, a darker side to his nature, a private personality which the author may or may not allow his satirist to discuss openly, and this personality is, like the public personality, consequent upon the satirist’s functions in satire. As a result of his violent attacks on vice, he acquires a number of unpleasant characteristics which make suspect his pose of a simple lover of plain truth. (22)

Macilente’s rather callous poisoning of Puntarvolo’s dog in Every Man Out of his Humor supplies a rather vivid example of the unsavory characteristics of a Jonsonian satirist. As Kernan goes on to argue, though, the unpleasant aspects of the satirists character should be read as part of his character’s satiric function, which is the exposure of vice; i.e. the author is not employing the satirist character as a paragon of virtue in himself, according to Kernan. He states,

If, however, we accept the strange, twisted, contradictory satirist as a fictitious character created in order to achieve the satiric end, the exposure of vice and depravity, then we can direct our attention to the ways in which the authors of great satire manipulate their satirists and exploit them in a thoroughly dramatic fashion. (28)

3 Goldberg argues that James used the rhetoric of kingly virtue as a “mysterious” shroud to cover his royal prerogative and his desires for material pleasures:

The king’s retired mysteries clothe royal pleasures; beneath his assertions of the inscrutability of the royal will are secret desires and delights. The arcana provide a rhetoric of virtue – and virtue is power – a rhetoric of power that covers the secret pleasures and shrouds the body in the image of the state (83).

4 In 1611 James commercialized the lower ranks of the nobility by creating and marketing the title of baronet.

5 Nenna’s treatise was translated into English in 1600 by Sir William Jones; Richard Jones’s The Book of Honor and Arms was written in 1590. The elision of terms in these Elizabethan texts does not necessarily contradict Jankowski’s assertion that earlier authors maintained a distinction. There seems to be a dual
sense in the usage of the terms during the period wherein “nobility,” for instance, can denote both the
general quality of elevated rank and can also denote the specific rank of a member of the peerage
depending on context.

6 See Chapter One, note 16.

7 The introduction to this play by Herford and Simpson in the Oxford edition argues that the collaborative
composition of this play was such that Jonson, Marston, and Chapman each wrote separate sections of the
play. The introduction also surveys critical arguments as to who wrote which section. Here, while
acknowledging the efforts of Marston and Chapman in the play’s composition, I still find a relevant
consistency between *Eastward Ho!* and Jonson’s other comedies of this period, particularly with regards to
the criticism of Jacobean social mobility. Moreover, affinities with Jonson’s social satire can be found in
other works of Chapman and Marston respectively. For example, the satiric inter-class marriage between
Laberelle and Florizel in Chapman’s *A Humorous Day’s Mirth* is similar to the satire of inter-class
marriages made in *Every Man in His Humor* through the marriage of the Kiteles, and the satiric treatment
of the foolish courtier Ballurdo in *Antonio and Mellida* recalls Jonson’s foolish gentlemen Stephen and
Soglardo.

8 There is very likely a pun involved here between cozen and cousin in the title, “Coozen Francke.”

9 Martin Bainton, in “‘Good Tricks of Youth’: Renaissance Comedy, New Comedy and the Prodigal Son
Paradigm” notes that the New Comic paradigm was adapted in Renaissance Europe to critique the
prodigality of youth that the original Roman comedies had actually depicted as triumphing “over the greed,
lechery and conservatism of the patriarchs (par. 7). As Bainton notes, “Attempts were made to harmonise
the traditions of Prodigal Son drama and Latin New Comedy and create a ‘Christian Terence’” (par. 10).
Viewed in the context of this tradition, the similarities to the New Comic plot in *Eastward Ho!* comprise
another critique of the prodigality of Jacobean gallants.

10 Cavendish’s case is discussed on page 23.

11 As noted in Chapter One, the satiric servant figures that Jonson typically employs as expositors typically
occupy social places that are more or less outside of the social hierarchy.

12 As Corvino’s railing continues, his jealous perversity becomes a sort of sexual perversity as he fits Celia
with a chastity belt and promises to deprive her of “natural” sexual pleasure:

Then, here’s a locke, which I will hang vpon thee;
And, now I thinke on’t, I will keepe thee backe-wards;
Thy lodging shall be backe-wards; they walkes back-wards;
Thy prospect – all be backe-wards; and no pleasure,
That thou shalt know, but backe-wards: Nay, since you force
My honest nature, know, it is your owne

Being too open, makes me mke vse you thus. (2.5.57-63)

13 The language in this parenthetical is very similar to language of would-be clients in letters to those to
whom they were appealing for patronage.

14 Corvino’s stilted dialogue, here, stopping and starting as he does, indicates his volatility and implies very
probably his unfitness for the responsibility that comes with gentility. Jonas Barish’s comments in *Ben
Jonson and the Language of Prose Comedy* on the use of the curt style in establishing character are
applicable in analysis of Corvino’s speech. Barish writes that “the curt period serves especially well to
characterize angry or indignant, impatient or volatile, or merely distracted or simple-minded people” (53).

15 In the last of these devices, Mosca is particularly like a Roman clever slave in a New Comedy, devising
a plot for his master to cuckold a greedy merchant. Citing the similarities between the New Comic romance
plot and the cuckoldling plot of *Volpone* and Mosca, Murray Roston, in an article for the *Ben Jonson
Journal*, entitled, “Volpone: Comedy or Mordant Satire,” argues for a reading of the play as a truncated
festive comedy. Particularly he argues that the antics of Volpone and Mosca in hoodwinking the gulls have
their roots in the festive cuckoldling plots of Italian comedy. In Jonson’s handling of the cuckoldling plot,
however, the emphasis is not placed on the comic triumph of romantic love between a young master and
the wife of a greedy agelast that he desires, but on the satire of the perverse greed of the husband who
willingly offers his wife as a prostitute, as well as on the perversity of the master and his servant in seeking
to engineer what is essentially a rape.

16 Jonson is rather somewhat prophetic here. Though baronies were not salable in 1610 when the play was
first produced – the smaller title of baronetcy was not even sold until the following year – in 1615, under
the influence of the emergent Duke of Buckingham, James put English baronies on the market.
Bruce Thomas Boehrer’s article, “Renaissance Overeating: The Sad Case of Ben Jonson” details the tension between the moral restraint advocated in Jonson’s poetry and the tendency towards gluttony and heavy drinking that apparently characterized Jonson, the man. As Boehrer shows, these sensuous indulgences – symptoms of the appetite-driven vices that are presented in their absurd extremity in the character of Mammon – were very typical of the Jacobean court, though courtiers like Jonson nonetheless morally proscribed them. Boehrer argues that Jonson’s stance is derived from a necessary “independence” from his own moral proscriptions, and independence that the Jacobean court generally allotted to itself.

The similarities to a formulaic New Comedy in the resolution of *The Alchemist* are many. In addition to the other clever slave type antics of Face mentioned here, there is also the adaptation of the haunted house device that Jonson borrows from Plautus’ *Mostellaria*. In that play, Tranio keeps his old master, the *senex* Theopropides, from entering his house to find out the partying that he and Philolaches have been engaging in by telling him that the house has been visited by a ghost while he was away and is haunted. Similarly, Face attempts to keep Lovewit from finding out his con operation with Face and Doll by telling him the house has been visited by the plague.

Ross questions the virtue of Lovewit, equating him with Subtle (448). This equation, however, is based on an assumption that Face is a servant to both of them, an assumption that is challenged in the text from the play’s opening conversation, in which Face argues for his own supremacy in the venture tripartite. Face continues to assert at least his equality with Subtle throughout the play, and, though one of his guises is Lungs, the doctor’s servant, the outcome of the play’s comic plot seems to give Face the upper hand in the final analysis. Without the basis of Face’s relationship of service to Subtle, the equation between Subtle and Lovewit that Ross posits falls apart. Nevertheless, her consequent argument that the practices of the Jacobean “dominant class” are similar to those of the marginal classes still is instructive. I find Lovewit to be an exception to that rule, however, rather than an example of it.
Gullible Servants: The Satiric Servant as Dupe

Ben Jonson’s *Underwood* poem XLIV, subtitled “A Speech According to Horace,” rehearses a common Horatian moral theme of attacking national degeneracy by lamenting the way in which English nobility has declined in the early decades of the seventeenth century. The poem places the blame for this decline, in part, upon the young Jacobean English nobility for their negligence in failing to cultivate civic and military virtues. Their lack of interest in traditional “noble” virtues such as learning and military prowess, the poem implies, leaves a deplorable vacuum of feudal leadership in the state. In satirizing the alleged decline of the Jacobean noble youth, the speaker in Jonson’s poem chides “the noble English heires” for indulging self-serving habits of luxurious and conspicuous consumption and at the expense of education and training in political and military matters, matters which, the poet implies, should be the proper concern of men of their rank and standing (59).

Speaking ironically for the young nobles, the speaker mocks the extravagance and laziness of the aristocracy and asks,

> Why are we rich, or great, except to show

> All licence in our lives? What need we know,

> More then to praise a Dog? or Horse? or speake

> The Hawking language? or our Day to breake

> With Citizens? let Clownes, and Tradesmen breed

> Their Sonnes to studie Arts, the Lawes, the Creed: (69-74)

As these lines indicate, one of the major problems with the noble youth’s abdication of their responsibilities in favor of luxuries is that the serious matters of state are left to
“Clownes and Tradesmen” who, as the poem’s earlier lines indicate, are an absurd shadow of England’s former feudal military prowess, being good for little more that the yearly show at the Artillery Garden where they “fight drie / The Battels of [their] Aldermanitie; / Without the hazard of a drop of blood” (45-47). The poem asserts that the citizen militia is more than a little diminished without noble leadership at its head when it notes the replacement of heroic names of past military glory with the new names of less recognizable citizen leaders: “In the stead of bold / Beauchamps, and Neuills, Cliffords, Audleys old; / Insert thy Hodges, and those newer men, / As Stiles, Dike, Ditchfield, Millar, Crips, and Fen” (51-54). The very names of the “newer men” evoke their low breeding and imply baser professions.

Moreover, Jonson has historically portrayed the elevation of low born men to positions beyond their ability as a sign of a ridiculous and disordered society. The suggestion of sons of clowns studying the arts here is reminiscent of the ridiculous gentility of Sogliardo and Fungoso, two of the gulls in *Every Man Out of His Humor*, or of the inept and immature carriage of Kastril, the pugnacious young gentleman in *The Alchemist*. Similarly, the equation of nobility with extravagance and entertainment on the part of the heirs recalls the dissipation of Petronell Flash in *Eastward Ho!* or the appetite of Epicure Mammon. As the previous chapters have argued, those comedies expose to ridicule the injustice and absurdity of such unmeritorious characters occupying stations of high social rank, especially insofar as they were able to obtain those positions through their wealth, rather than because of their virtues. Such social “injustice” – the promotion of persons to higher rank on the basis of their wealth, and the accompanying pursuit of wealth and luxury – became progressively more common during James’s rule, in part due
to the increasing commercialization of the favors of Jacobean patronage. The increase in
the promotion of the unmeritorious and the cultivation of luxury among the upper classes,
so the poem implies, has resulted, by the end of James’s reign, in a noble youth ready to
cede the care of the nation to a nascent citizen gentry because they cannot be bothered
with the duties that have traditionally fallen to those of their blood. They say
dismissively,

Let poore Nobilitie be virtuous: Wee,

Descended in a rope of Titles, be

From Guy, or Bevis, Arthur, or from whom

The Herald will. Our blood is now become

Past any need of virtue. Let them care,

That in the Cradle of their Gentry are;

To serve the State by Councels, and by Armes:

We neither love the Troubles, nor the harmes. (79-86)

There is a sad irony in the noble youth’s assertion of its pedigree. In traditional
arguments for the superiority of blood in determining “true” noble nature, such as those
rehearsed by Possidonio in Nenna’s A Discourse Whether a Noble Man by Birth or a
Gentleman by Desert is Greater in Nobilitie, blood is equated with virtue; it is assumed
that those of the blood will display virtues. Here, the noble young speaker asserts that,
given that he has riches to accompany it, his blood has no need of virtue. What is more,
the poem hints that even his actual ancestry may be less than important. Theoretically,
the young gallant who makes these claims stands upon his “blood” rather than his
“virtue,” but the prepositional phrase, “from whom/ The Herald will,” at the end of his
list of titles indicates that his pedigree is as likely as not falsely constructed by the herald in return for money to give an air of legitimacy his wealth-born nobility.5

Whether or not their avowed pedigrees are true, the descent of blood from noble ancestors has certainly not produced any noble virtues in these young lords. The young gallant in whose voice the poet speaks would rather give his attention to his “whore,” his “gate, / Carriage, and dressing” than to studies or martial training (87-88). The typical noble youth of England are depicted in this poem as devoid of any social responsibility or shame. Doubtless, there were many exceptions to this social trend that Jonson here critiques, but the poem laments that the dissipation of the aristocracy is – and has been – on the rise.

The moral problem, of course, extends beyond just the prodigality of the aristocratic youth, for as James had correctly noted in Basilikon Doron, the nobility is often emulated by the lower orders of the social scale. Thus, the replacement of virtue with wealth and luxury as the main interest the upper classes, to a large extent, tends to result in a similar shift in values throughout society. Jonson satirizes this vicious emulation of the faults of social “betters” consistently in his comedies: Fungoso emulates the absurd sartorial extravagance of Fastidious Briske, whom he takes to be an important courtier; Stephen attempts to swear like Bobadil, whom he assumes is a gentleman; Mistress Otter longs to join in the antics of the Collegiate ladies, and so on. The devaluation of virtue at the top of the social scale results in its under-appreciation by society at large, as the poet asserts in the final lines where, in frustration, he gives up his diatribe on the unmeritorious youth, who seem to unjustly thrive in spite of their immoral negligence:
I may not longer on these pictures stay,
These Carkasses of honour; Taylor’s blocks,
Cover’d with Tissue, whose prosperitie mocks
The fate of things: whilst totter’d virtue holds
Her broken Armes up, to their emptie moulds. (98-102)

The tone of satiric admonishment that Jonson takes in this poem is by no means unusual for the poet whose comedies all assert themselves to comically ridicule vice. An earlier poem included in the Underwood, “An Epistle to a Friend, to Persuade him to the Wars” (XV), a poem very similar in theme to the Horatian satire cited above, depicts the immoral dissipation and extravagance that the poet ascribes to the young nobility in Underwood XLIV as plaguing English society as a whole. The speaker castigates the contemporary culture in the following unflattering description:

. . . Pleasures only sought!
Honour and honestie, as poore things thought
As they are made! Pride, and stiffe Clownage mixt
To make up Greatnesse! and mans whole good fix’d
In bravery, or gluttony, or coyne,
All which he makes servants of the Groine,
Thither it flowes. (41-47)

The appetite-driven abuses that Jonson ascribes in Underwood XLIV to unmeritorious and wealthy upper class folk are here depicted as characterizing all of London society. Moreover, the devaluation of merit, it is implied here, leads to a confusion of the social
order, wherein “pride” mixed with “stiffe Clownage” – and sufficient money – are taken for greatness.

The particular vices that Jonson satirizes in these poems, of course, were not unique to the Jacobean England during the 1610s and 1620s. Jonson’s Elizabethan comedies had satirized particular characters, like Fastidious Briske, for instance, for the same vices of overvaluing their apparel and other exterior trappings of show. The whole vicious courtly faction of Cynthia’s Revels, another Elizabethan play, is scathingly ridiculed for their luxurious indolence. The obsession with appearances, particularly with brave clothes, is lamented as a sickness of Elizabethan society by William Harrison as early as 1577 in the Description of England, where he complains, “Oh, how much cost is bestowed nowadays upon our bodies and how little upon our souls! How many suits of apparel hath the one, and how little furniture hath the other! How long time is asked in decking up of the first, and how little space left wherein to feed the latter!” (146). As historians like R. Malcom Smuts, Lawrence Stone, and Linda Levy Peck have pointed out, however, the scope of material consumption expanded notably in Stuart England, both in terms of the extravagance of expenditure itself and in terms of the breadth of the culture of consumption. Smuts summarizes the free-spending court culture of Jacobean London as follows:

With their London houses, the court nobility feasted and entertained clients, colleagues, foreign ambassadors, and the royal family itself. The cost of supporting these opulent establishments often came close to bankrupting men who were among the kingdom’s richest. “The first thing to be noted,” [Peter Paul] Rubens commented in 1629 about the English
court, “is that all the leading nobles live on a sumptuous scale and spend money lavishly, so that the majority of them are hopelessly in debt.”

Much of the splendor of the court, and a fair proportion of expense of staffing the central government, was always borne by a few great courtiers, who tried to recoup their outlays from the licit and illicit profits of office. (55)

The consumptive practices of a significant portion of the upper classes at this time led to a greater need for money to finance their lifestyle. This increased need for money, in turn, led to an increase in court corruption as high ranking aristocrats and state officials marketed the favors of patronage such as monopolies, offices with perquisites, and titles themselves in exchange for large monetary “gifts” from their clients. Linda Levy Peck’s study of Stuart corruption notes several specific instances prominent Jacobean aristocratic patrons extorting money from clients in exchange for granting privileges of office or patents. As one representative example of this sort of bribery and corruption that increasingly characterized Jacobean patronage, she describes in detail the plight of “inveterate office-seeker” Sir Dudley Carleton, and quotes from his secretary, Edward Sherburn, a passage which notes the frustration of one seeking patronage without sufficient money to bid for it: “nothing can be don, in these times without consideration, and it is in vaine to hope (be a [man’s] merits never so deserving) that without money anything is to be obtained” (62, qtd in Peck 63). As Sherburn’s comment explicitly notes, “deserving” merit was ignored, in his experience, as a quality recommending one for advancement, when the alternative recommendation for promotion was the ability to compensate richly for the patronage received. Again, the corruption of patronage was not
an entirely new phenomenon, particular to Jacobean England, but as Peck notes, during James’s reign “money increasingly shaped patron-client relationships,” culminating, of course, with the monopolization and even more explicit commercialization of patronage by Buckingham late in James’s reign, and as money waxed as a determining factor in the distribution of patronage, merit, as Sherburn notes, waned (66).

In their practices of immoderate spending and recouping their finances by selling offices and perquisites, the London upper classes were taking their cue from the crown itself. James’s lavish spending is legendary, and the spendthrift habits of his court made for a particularly difficult financial situation for the Crown in the years between 1610 and 1621 because James had no income during this time from parliamentary subsidies. Disagreements between the Crown and Parliament led to the failure of Cecil’s proposed Great Contract in 1611 and to the abrupt dismissal of the “Addled Parliament” of 1614 before subsidies could be granted. As a result, the Crown was granted no funds by Parliament during these years, and James was forced to make his money from the sale of patents, monopolies and other projects.

Peck describes the “especially large number [of patents] granted in the period between 1610 and 1620. These patents amounted to an alternative to parliamentary taxation between the failure of the Great Contract, which attempted to create a yearly stipend for the Crown, and the eve of the parliament of 1621” (138). Many of these patent and monopoly grants were seen by James’s contemporaries as a corrupt abuse of prerogative and privilege, and the court was even accused of accepting bribes for its favors. The practice of marketing perquisites in exchange for “gifts” came under official government attack in the 1621 Parliament and was (theoretically) curbed in the Statute of
Monopolies of 1624, which allowed for the “validity of patents was to be tried at common law with the penalty triple damages” to those found to be unethically distributed (Peck 139).

James’s attempts to circumvent parliament’s role in taxation by these “alternative” means of raising money created a rift between the king and Parliament centering on the question of which was preeminent in establishing the “right” of economic policy during these years: the king’s prerogative or the citizens’ rights as protected by common law. The proponents of common law felt parliamentary approval was necessary for any tax to be levied on the people, and that, therefore, James’s unilateral proclamations, grants of monopolies, and projects, which were an indirect means of taxation, were in violation of their common law rights. James, conversely, saw their quibbling and refusal to supply sufficient subsidies as an unruly impingement on his divine right – and responsibility – to govern the nation.

One of James’s chief opponents in arguing for the rule of law against royal prerogative was Chief Justice Sir Edward Coke, who drafted the original bill against monopolies for the 1621 parliament. Coke had also found himself opposed to James during the preceding decade in his debates with Sir Thomas Egerton, the Lord Chancellor under James, over the issue of judiciary authority, particularly whether final civil judgment was the province of the King’s Bench or the Court of Chancery. As Robert C. Evans notes in “Contemporary Contexts of Jonson’s The Devil is an Ass,” it had become somewhat customary in the early seventeenth century for those who had not “found justice” in their cases before the Common Law courts, which Coke oversaw, to seek redress in the court of Chancery, under the direction of Egerton (159). Coke saw this
overturning of verdicts from the King’s Bench courts as a sort of interference, and he argued that the Bench needed to be free of subjection to the Crown if it was to fairly dispense justice according to the rule of law. One of the effects of this debate was that, like the parliamentary objection to James’s attempts to raise revenue by royal proclamation, it presented a significant challenge to the traditional political and judicial authority of the Crown and the established aristocracy.

The challenges to the Crown’s ultimate authority in matters of judicial dispute were not the only challenges James faced in these years as a result of his court’s near insolvency. His need to seek financial help from Parliament led to challenges from that body with regards to Jacobean social policy as well.

As Leah Marcus notes in The Politics of Mirth, the increased marketing of patronage was hardly enough to cover James’s expenditures. Marcus observes,

1614 was a year of unprecedented political and economic crisis in the reign of James I. In the years since 1611 when he had dissolved the last Parliament, his financial situation had grown more precarious. He was forced to become increasingly dependent upon income from monopolies and other schemes; by the end of 1613 the court suffered an extreme lack of money despite the abundance of new projects. (48)

In 1614 James was constrained by his financial difficulties to convene a new Parliament. As Marcus explains, James hoped that the Parliament would support his government of divine regency and freely offer the subsidies he needed to govern. He very much hoped that they would not fall into quibbling with him over prerogative and the rights of common law as the 1611 Parliament had done. Marcus notes, “[James] likened himself
to God, the first gift-giver out of love, and pledged to give Parliament the gift of not insisting upon his prerogative if they in return would grant him the gift of their love. Their financial support would presumably follow as a matter of course” (49).

Unfortunately for James, his imagined love-fest turned out not to be the case. The Parliament of 1614 had a decisively Puritan and Sabbatarian element to it, and, before granting James his subsidy, the Parliament insisted on the curtailing of Sabbath day “Sports” and holiday festivals, which they saw as “popish rituals,” but which were near and dear to James’s ecclesiastical policies and particularly important in the context of his insistence on royal supremacy over matters of the church. Moreover, the MPs, like Coke’s judiciary, asserted the “supremacy of common law over royal proclamations,” no doubt at least in part as a response to James’s practices of alternative taxation (Marcus 49). James quickly dissolved what he called the “Addled Parliament” rather than part with his policies or prerogative, but the whole incident had presented yet another challenge to the Crown’s traditional authority, just as Coke’s argument with Egerton and parliamentary challenges to James’s right to revenue from proclamations had.

The debate between James and the Puritans over church reform had been a long standing issue ever since the King had deftly managed to ignore most of the requests for reformation made in the 1603 Millenary Petition at the Hampton Court Conference in 1604. Though James did give the Puritans what appeared to be a fair hearing at the conference, as historian Frederick Shriver notes, James, for the most part sided with the Bishops in matters of church reformation, including matters of retaining traditional rituals and ceremonies, which, in their broadest definition, included the Sabbath day Sports. Shriver also points out that the real issue that James took with the Puritans at Hampton
Court and following was what he saw as their challenge to his royal authority, as he indicated in his first address to Parliament following Hampton Court, where he cited Puritans as dangerous, not so much for their theological ideas, as for their tendency towards political sedition. “The Puritanes and Novelists,” James said, “doe not so farre differ from us in points of Religion, as in their confused forme of Policie and Paritie, being ever discontented with the present government, & impatient to suffer any superiority, which maketh their sect unable to be suffred in any wel governed Commonwealth” (Political Works 274). Shriver sums up the continued tense relations between James and the Puritans following Hampton court as follows:

From February 1605 onwards, the king’s policy toward the puritans [sic] never wavered. He showed leniency to deprived ministers who made no public display of their disapproval of the disputed points in the polity or liturgy of the Church, by allowing them time to find new homes, hoping that they might change their minds. On the other hand, he was just as careful to see that trouble-makers were dealt with. (68)

The Parliamentary opposition to ritual festivals and Sabbath day sports in 1614 represented an outbreak of the “seditious” troublemaking that James had feared might come from Puritan elements in the church. As Nicholas McDowell asserts in his study of Puritan opposition to James’s Book of Sports, the point of disagreement between James and the Puritans regarding traditional religious festivals and holiday sports had reached a head in 1614. McDowell notes, “This [issue of games and sports] was a pressing issue in 1614: ritual festivity was being met with increasing opposition in the localities and a bill for the suppression of Sabbath abuses was one of those which died with the king’s angry
dissolution of the ‘Addled’ Parliament on 7 June” (357). As during his dealings with Puritan petitions for reformation at Hampton Court, James’s primary concern in defending ecclesiastical ritual traditions was with the issue of royal supremacy. McDowell writes,

[B]y 1614 James had begun to “identify the exercise of his royal autonomy with the promotion of traditional pastimes”. The issue of Sunday sports became so contested because it epitomized the central debate between scriptural and institutional authority; over whether religious ceremonies without scriptural sanction could be imposed by the authority of the monarch or the established Church. (357-58)

The disagreements between James the Addled Parliament represented not only another challenge to the King’s ideal of the royal supremacy and absolutist prerogative of the Crown, but also signaled the rise of the urban citizen mercantile class, which contained a number of the Puritans who vocally opposed James’s Sabbath policies, as a political power in English society. The increased political power of citizen merchants was largely a result of their emergence as a force within the nation’s economy: James was forced to give them space to voice their social concerns in Parliament because he needed their money. The king was, of course, not the only one whose financial needs forced him to cede a measure of his power to the newly moneyed mercantile class. The indebted members of the feudal English gentry, like their king, often found themselves financially dependent to some degree upon lower ranking citizens, to whom they owed large amounts of money. Their indebtedness to the middle class merchants and money lenders, meant that, like James, they found themselves facing challenges to their power
from those who traditionally had been perceived as under their authority. These inverted relations between the insolvent gentry and citizen money-lenders is illustrated in *The Devil is an Ass* in a conversation between the usurious citizen goldsmith Guilt-head and his son Plutarchus over whether the father ought to lend money in trust to the gentleman fool, Fitzdottrel. Guilt-head explains to his son that lending to the prodigal gentry and calling in debts they cannot pay is how he makes his living:

> We liue, by finding fooles out, to be trusted.
> Our shop-bookes are our pastures, our corn-grounds,
> We lay 'hem op'n, for them to come into:
> And when wee haue 'hem there, wee driue 'hem vp
> In t’one of out two Pounds, the Compters, straight. (3.1.16-20)

Guilt-head’s speech illustrates the extent to which much of the mercantile citizenry had gained economic power over the feudal gentility as a result of the latter’s immoderate consumption.

The picture that Jonson presents in *The Devil is an Ass*, one that was hinted at in *Eastward Ho!*, is a situation wherein the citizenry is actually preying on and exploiting the gentry. Ironically, Guilt-head’s extortionist usury is engaged in with a mind towards gaining sufficient funds to make his son a gentleman (3.1.14). He will gentrify his heir at the expense of the established gentry. Plutarchus notes the perverse sort of cyclical parasitic relationship between the urban gentry and the ambitious merchants when he says that he would rather not be a gentleman because then he would be the one in position to be cheated by usurious money lenders. He says,

> I doe not wish to be one, truly, Father.
In a descent, or two, wee come to be
Iust i’ their state, fit to be coozend, like ‘hem. (3.1.27-29)

Ironically, Plutarchus – at this point in the play – would rather remain a citizen merchant because, in materially consumptive London, they hold the real power. This shift in power is, again, not entirely unlike the economic power that Parliament was slowly gaining over the Crown and a disruption of the traditional social order of things.

The cumulative effects of these social and political developments – the ever increasing material extravagance and immoderate spending of the Crown and the Court, the ceding of military and civic responsibilities and powers to an nascent citizenry by many young Jacobean nobles in favor of cultivating an extravagant and indolent lifestyle, the challenges to royal authority from the Parliament and the courts of common law, and the challenge to royal ecclesiastical supremacy by the Puritans who opposed ritual festivity – especially when these effects are coupled with the heightened factionalism that dominated the Jacobean court in between the death of Salisbury and the ascendancy of Buckingham (roughly 1612-1618), created a political and social atmosphere that, as Jonson describes it in the satiric poems quoted above from the *Underwood*, was characterized by a profound sense of social disorder. The comedies that Jonson composed during this period, *Bartholomew Fair* (1614) and *The Devil is an Ass* (1616) reflect and lampoon this disorder and its causes, as his earlier comedies had reflected and satirized the injustices of late Elizabethan social mobility and the inflation of honors and commercialization of patronage in the early years of James’s reign. The plays lampoon the overweening claims to authority latent in the challenges to the crown by such emergent constituencies as the Puritan parliamentarians and the common law judges – in
characters such as Zeal of the Land Busy and Adam Overdo, for example, characters whose very names bespeak their upstart nature – but the plays as a whole are equally as critical, perhaps, of the English higher classes for their insolvency and their devaluation of virtue in their pursuit of the money they needed to finance their lavish lifestyle. Aristocratic extravagance and corruption, Jonson argues in the Underwood poems XV and XLIV, in neglecting the cultivation of virtue and failing to reward merit with the favors of patronage, gives room to the presumptive claims to authority made by the members of the emergent merchant class.

In these two plays of the middle years of James’s reign, the social advancement of unworthy persons that Jonson had scathingly satirized as ridiculous and unjust in his early humors comedies and the commercialization of patronage that he depicts as dangerous to the social order in his middle comedies are pictured as more or less fait accompli. Those cultural phenomena that Jonson had depicted as cultural threats in the earlier comedies have in these plays woven themselves into the fabric of English life. As Plutarchus notes in the lines above, new gentry can be assimilated into the abuses of upper class culture in a “descent or two.” The chief dupes of these plays, for instance, Bartholomew Cokes and Fabian Fitzdotterel, are neither new moneyed fools looking to buy titles, nor frauds who affect the pose of courtiers; rather, they are men of real social rank, probably the type of second-generation gentry that Plutarchus describes, who, in a parody of the young aristocrats in Underwood XLIV, are bent on squandering their estates through frivolous material consumption. They are neither qualified for, nor interested in, any of the civic or martial responsibilities that might appertain to their elevated rank, nor are they even very concerned with maintaining their own reputations.
The plays also satirize the affectation of elevated place and authority on the parts of several characters of lower gentility, such as the pretensions to authority on the parts of the plays’ Justices of the Peace, Adam Overdo and Paul Eitherside. As the satire of the spendthrift and foolish knights reflects their participation in the prodigality of the upper classes during these years of James’s reign, so the satire of these pretentious gentlemen notes them as typical of an upstart parliamentarian gentry. Their overweening claims of authority reflect not so much fraudulent claims to rank made by poseurs, like the claims of Bobadil, Fastidious Briske, or Subtle, as they do reflect the contemporary challenge to the ultimate authority of the Crown made by common law judges like Sir Edward Coke and the citizen members of Parliament.

These comedies do retain the biting satire of acquisitive greed and corrupted commercialization of patronage that continued to characterize English society. The greed in these comedies tends to manifest itself, as it does in The Alchemist, in out and out fraud, but, consistent with the overall depiction of a disordered society, the fraudulent corruption in these plays is embedded in the official authority structures of the plays’ social orders. The members of the watch in Bartholomew Fair are portrayed as corrupt. John Littlewit is able to bribe them to imprison Busy in the stocks so that he and his wife Win may see the rest of the fair (3.6.76-111). Captain Whit, the watch’s informer, is also a bawd, and it is implied that he engages in extortion by informing upon criminal vices to which he has actually been an accessory, thereby helping the watch to collect both a fee and a fine from their gallant victims (3.1.1-7, 45-46). The watch, which is supposed to keep the king’s peace, is substantially more interested in its own profit than keeping order. Its members’ insubordination is made explicit when the madman Troubleall,
happening upon them fastening Busy in the stocks, greets them as “the Kings louing, and obedient sugiects,” and Bristle, one of the watchmen, replies, “Obedient, friend? take heede what you speake, I advise you: Oliuer Bristle advise you. His louing subiects, we grant you: but not his obedient, at this time, by your leaue, wee know our selues, a little better then so” (4.1.3-7). Bristle’s comment is comically assertive in its context, but it hints at the disorder that arises from challenges to royal authority, especially so, considering that Bristle is Overdo’s subordinate, and Overdo represents the kind of presumptuous common law judge who presented a challenge to royal judicial authority in the middle years of James’s reign.

The corruption and disorder is illustrated in these plays as infiltrating not only the structures of justice and law enforcement, but also the economic policies of the Jacobean government. In The Devil is an Ass, the projecter, Meercraft, is depicted as an integral member of London court society, where he peddles his absurd projects to influential courtiers in order to fleece them of their finances. Meercraft and his cohort Everill are depicted as clear frauds and cons, but they are also depicted as centrally involved in the marketing of projects, offices, and monopolies that dominated Jacobean economic policy at this time.

Corruption and disorder define societal relations in these comedies, creating a satiric critique of the corruption and disorder that was so often attributed to London culture in the middle years of James’s reign. In the society that these plays depict, the “vices” have become such a part of the cultural fabric that the distinctions between virtue and folly become almost completely blurred. As Herford and Simpson remark concerning the difference between Bartholomew Fair and Jonson’s earlier comedies,
“The lines of cleavage between the tricksters and the dupes, which so largely determine the structure of Jonsonian comedy, are here unusually complicated” (2.137). In sum, the threats to the social order that had been posed by vices of unmeritorious fools and affective frauds in Jonson’s early comedies have, in these plays, come to characterize the play’s society as a whole. The whole social fabric is in a state of chaos and disorder. Therefore, the moral compass that seems so clearly oriented in Jonson’s earlier satiric comedies is decidedly less true or easily discerned in Bartholomew Fair, and to some extent, in The Devil is an Ass. Accordingly, the justice that is typically dispensed upon the “vicious” in the earlier comedies is suspended to a great degree in these comedies, primarily because there are no unsullied characters that are worthy to dispense it, but also because there is a sense of gracious recognition that all have sinned, and therefore, strict justice – at least within the context of the plays’ societies – is rather unrealistic.

A key dramaturgical element of the way that Jonson adapts his comic structure to the satire of the increasingly disordered social milieu is, once again, the way that he employs the servant figure in these comedies. In the earlier comedies, where the moral satire is more clearly cut, Jonson adapts the subversive characteristics of the classical clever slave and the English servant to the development of a witty servant figure whose scheming and satiric dialogue exposes and ridicules the dupes of those comedies. As the previous chapters have argued, Jonson capitalizes on the inherently subversive – and disorderly – nature of the servant character to undercut and expose the fraudulent affectations of the humorous characters who pretend to some level of rank or place that they do not, in fact, hold or deserve. In these plays, the disorderly characteristics of the servant, rather than subversively exposing and ridiculing the affected facades of others,
actually implicate him in the general disorder of society. Because their subversiveness is 
either matched or outdone by the disorder of the culture around them, in these plays, the 
servant characters themselves become dupes; rather than exposing the affectations and 
wares of others, they end up having their own affectations and vices exposed.

Ironically, they end up being exposed in large part by their very efforts to expose 
the vices of others. In *Bartholomew Fair*, Wasp, the servant of the young noble Cokes, 
fails to effectively expose and ridicule the vices of those around him because he, himself, 
is ultimately guilty of the very foolishness that he condemns. In *The Devil is an Ass*, 
Jonson combines the roles of a would-be clever servant and a medieval demonic vice in 
the character of Pug. Pug attempts to undertake schemes that, typical of both a New 
Comic clever slave and a medieval vice, would encourage other characters to carry out 
their vicious, sinful behaviors, but he finds that any vicious chaos he can imagine is 
trumped by the everyday world of Jacobean court society, particularly by the court 
projector, Meercraft, who is revealed to be a more sophisticated vice than Pug can ever 
hope to be.

The characterization of Pug as a vice and his sophomoric bumbling his way 
through the plot of *The Devil is an Ass* marks another shift in comic method that Jonson 
employs in these comedies, which is the use of the disordered and “barbarous” medieval 
ethos as a foil for a vicious Jacobean culture. The inferiority of Pug’s antiquated attempts 
at promoting vice in comparison with the more modern viciousness of Meercraft in *The 
Devil is an Ass* makes a clear indictment of Jacobean society, as will be detailed below. 
The medieval appears as a foil for modern vices in *Bartholomew Fair* to some extent as 
well.
The medieval ethos of *Bartholomew Fair* is partly created, of course, by the play’s festival setting – the fair in honor of St. Bartholomew, instituted in 1133, but the play also borrows elements from medieval dramatic staging that reinforce its archaic feel. Critics such as Shannon Miller and Eugene Waith have noted, for instance that rather than changing scenes, as was typical Renaissance staging practice, *Bartholomew Fair* utilizes booths – like Ursula’s pig booth and the carts belonging to Lantern Leatherhead and Joan Trash – that remain on stage for the bulk of the play, and the action of the play moves between them, as is typical of medieval mystery cycles (Miller 88). Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, moreover, draw attention to the similarities between Ursula’s kitchen and the medieval Hellmouth in their relative stage positions and in their associations with heat, fire, and venal sin (63). The medieval fair was seen by many contemporaries as a place of amoral riot. Puritan opposition to the fair, of course, linked it to medieval English Catholicism as something superstitious and idolatrous as well as being immoral in the more material senses of being a place of gluttony and lechery, and therefore something that should be discontinued. It is likely that the setting of this play in a medieval religious festival is imperative to its satire of Puritan hypocrisy and seditious tendencies, especially given the context of the debate between James and the Puritans over Sunday sports. McDowell notes the possibility of the play’s composition as a polemic piece siding with James against the Puritans in the controversy over religious festivals. “According to John Aubrey,” McDowell writes, “James had commanded Jonson to ‘write against the Puritans, who began to be troublesome in his time’, and it has been suggested that the representation of Puritanism in *Bartholomew Fair* may have been instigated by the government” (357). The representation of Puritans in the play
reveals their hypocrisy in piously declaiming against the fair as a place of bodily and spiritual sins, for the Puritans in the play, most notably Zeal of the Land Busy, are the most arduous participants in the gluttonous abuses of the fair and contribute more than most to the atmosphere of riotous disorder. If the fair is a site of disorder – and it is – then it is no more disordered than the everyday world inhabited by those who would oppose its excesses. The fair’s employment as the setting in Bartholomew Fair, thus, foregrounds the similarities between the “holiday riot” of the festival and the inherent disorder of Jacobean London, just as the relative virtue of the medieval “vice” in The Devil is an Ass highlights the sophisticated level of corruption in Jacobean court politics.

In Bartholomew Fair and The Devil is an Ass, therefore, Jonson, joins the devices of medieval drama to his typical adaptation of classical comic norms in order to reinforce the moral satire of Jacobean culture. The plays represent a comic indictment of a world that, through the escalating extravagance of its aristocratic class, the ambitious pretensions of its citizen class, and its economic system that is steeped in corruption, has become completely morally disordered. In the worlds of these plays, everyone is implicated in the venal chaos of society, which in many senses makes the dispensing of justice that typically closes Jonsonian comedy impossible. As a result, attitudes of forgiveness and grace tend to dominate the comic resolutions of Bartholomew Fair and, to a lesser extent, The Devil is an Ass, making them at first glance more akin to the happy endings of what has often been called “festive” comedy. Those who would draw significant attention to the rather unprecedented – for Jonson – happy endings of these comedies are not without warrant, but the gracious endings of Jonson’s comedies do not dull the moral satire of these plays. Jonson, perhaps, has not “descended from his pulpit”
or “stripped off the robes of his authority and of his chartered scorn” quite so much as it may initially seem (Herford & Simpson 2.133).

I

It seems that most recent critical discussions of Bartholomew Fair undertaken by Jonson scholars at some point must confront the problem that the play presents as an apparent aberration in the dramatist’s otherwise univocally neoclassical oeuvre. Thomas L. Martin poses the question typically at the outset of a recent article for the Ben Jonson Journal, entitled “Enormity and Aurea Mediocritas in Bartholomew Fayre: The Ideals of Classical Comedy:” “One of the great cruxes in the scholarship on Bartholomew Fayre,” writes Martin, “is the question of comedic design. In place of the classical conventions regulating plot and character types, we find instead the realistic enormities of a roisterous fair” (143). Leah Marcus states the question more clearly in terms of what it means for scholarship when she says in The Politics of Mirth: Jonson, Herrick, Milton, Marvell, and the Defense of Old Holiday Pastimes that critical “opinion has divided sharply over whether it is (to use one of its own recurrent puns) a foul play or a fair one – a dark indictment of human irrationality and moral decay or a celebration of the rejuvenating energies of folly and festival disorder” (38). This critical question seems to arise from at least two aspects of the play that differentiate it from its predecessors. The first is the play’s episodic and loosely knit plotting, which Herford and Simpson identify as an apparent “glaring disregard of classical structure” (1.70). By “classical structure,” Herford and Simpson apparently mean to indicate the Roman New Comic plot which is at the base of Jonson’s early and middle comedies. They note also the un-Roman characterization of Bartholomew Fair in comparison with the earlier comedies: “We
have [in this play] not to do with Plautine cunning slaves [like a Brainworm or a Mosca] and boastful soldiers [like Bobadil and Captain Shift] more or less cleverly disguised, but with unadulterated English roguery and vagabondage, as they grew and throve in the ripe soil of the great London show” (2.137). The second aspect of the play that differentiates it from its neoclassical predecessors is the complicated nature of the play’s moral satire, which for Herford and Simpson, seems to spring primarily from the native English “roguery and vagabondage” that defines the play’s characters. As is noted above, the Oxford editors felt that in this play, “The lines of cleavage between the tricksters and the dupes, which so largely determine the structure of Jonsonian comedy, are here unusually complicated” (2.137).

These aberrations from typical Jonsonian classicism in Bartholomew Fair have not stopped critics like Martin from according the play a homogenous place in the neoclassical Jonsonian canon. Martin argues that the “enormities,” the “roisterous” excesses of the fair are the “proper subject matter of comedy” according the Aristotelian and Horation conceptions of the genre (147). Quoting from Aristotle’s Poetics, he contends that the native “roguery and vagabondage” that Jonson’s Oxford editors find so unclassical can actually be seen as textbook material for neoclassical comedy “[i]f we think of enormity as being closely related to the ridiculous, the ‘mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harm to others’” (146-47). In further defense of the play as neoclassical, Martin notes that Jonson penned an “apologie” for Bartholomew Fair at the same time that he was writing his first translation of Horace’s Ars Poetica, both of which were lost to fire in 1623. Martin feels that this fact, recorded in Jonson’s conversations with William Drummond, “unquestionably establishes the connection between Ars
Poetica and Bartholmew Fayre” (149). Consequently, Martin, reads the play as a classical comedy composed along Horatian and Aristotelian lines and endorsing the Horatian moral principle of the golden mean: “What I suggest is that Jonson perfectly threads the camel drove of enormity through the eye of one golden needle, the *aurea mediocritas*. The enormity of the play, this copia of human foible and irregularity, stretches all bounds and then is moderated to a golden mean” (147). In Martin’s reading, *Bartholomew Fair* presents a neoclassical comic moral satire of humorous excesses much the same as Jonson’s earlier works do.

Nor is Martin the only critic to make a claim for the classicism in *Bartholomew Fair*. John Potter’s structural analysis of the play makes a very convincing case that, like its predecessor *Every Man Out of his Humor*, *Bartholomew Fair* is an example of Jonsonian reworking of Aristophanic Old Comedy. Potter argues that the play’s loose structure mirrors the plotting of Greek Old Comedy in its major episodes (291). He also argues that Jonson’s play, through its episodic structure, achieves the Old Comic end of exposing to characters their own vices and thereby achieving a social renewal. The satiric exposure results in “a recognition of their common humanity which destroys the hypocrisy and the pretentiousness of a corrupt society and reinstates the people of the fair into a new harmonious society” (298). For both Potter and Martin, despite the lack of formulaic New Comic plot structure that characterizes many of Jonson’s earlier comedies, *Bartholomew Fair* is nonetheless a typically neoclassical Jonsonian satiric comedy.

For other critics of the play, however, the festival, “holiday” elements of the play evoke a comic ethos much more indicative of what Bakhtin terms the carnivalesque than
they do anything like classicism. Noel Blincoe, in “Bartholmew Fayre: A Celebration of English Folk Festivals,” for example, argues for an analysis of the play as an instance of the dramatic carnivalesque, contending that “Jonson demonstrates how carnival license (which includes rude and improvisatory theater) in the social milieu of a Saturnalia that is sanctioned by tradition and Royalty promotes the well-being of the community” (67).

Blincoe is not alone in reading the play in the context of carnival. Shannon Miller, in “Consuming Mothers/Consuming Merchants: The Carnivalesque Economy of Jacobean City Comedy” reads the play in the context of an emerging cultural rhetoric, found in anti-feminist tracts, court masques, and city comedies, that identified the “open” and uncontainable female body with the similarly open and uncontainable nascent market economy in seventeenth century England. Miller argues that Bartholomew Fair “offer[s] a more complex negotiation of the metaphoric links between women’s bodies and the market. . . . [It] focus[es] cultural anxiety about the changing economic market of Jacobean London onto various female bodies – sometimes pregnant, sometimes sexually uncontained, always carnivalesque” (75). Miller’s reading owes much to the discussion of the carnivalesque, especially as it pertains to Bartholomew Fair, contained in Peter Stallybrass and Allon White’s The Politics and Poetics of Transgression. In that book’s chapter on this play, “The Fair, The Pig, Authorship,” Stallybrass and White argue that the play evidences a “complex interconnection of theatre, fair and authorship” wherein Jonson’s literary discourse is “‘contaminated’ both by its subject matter and by its relation to the ‘dirt’ of the theatre and the theatrical marketplace” (62,71). For critics like Miller, Stallybrass, White, and Blincoe, the grotesque, holiday elements of the carnival – what Martin might call the play’s “enormities” – overflow their boundaries in typical
carnivalesque fashion and frustrate any attempts by the author to frame them within a classical discourse.¹⁴

An oversimplified yet convenient grouping of these competing schools of thought on *Bartholomew Fair* might describe classicist readings of the play as interpreting the “enormities” of the fair as social vices that are in need of correction, whereas in the carnivalesque readings of the play, these same “vices” are read as the products of populist energies that arise from the play’s holiday ethos and either contribute to social renewal or at least signal a progressive economic development of society. In carnivalesque readings, the enormities are not necessarily vices, but amoral vestiges of an alternate, unofficial, and nascent culture. Marcus’s question regarding the appropriate critical view of the play serves as a convenient summary of the critical dilemma: is the play indeed “a foul play or a fair one – a dark indictment of human irrationality and moral decay or a celebration of the rejuvenating energies of folly and festival disorder”? (38).

Marcus’s own analysis of the play, though, no sooner summarizes this question of critical perception than it immediately claims that setting the play in a more narrowly defined historic context complicates matters beyond such polarities. Marcus argues, A study of its “occasion” will demonstrate that Jonson fully intended to have it both ways. He immerses his audience in the seamy squalor of Smithfield and exposes the vice and blasphemy which can lurk behind noble ideals like law and religion and education. The shabby, tinsel world of Bartholomew Fair seems to slough off its higher cultural forms as irreconcilable with its nature. (38)
The “occasion” that Marcus identifies as informing the play is the debate between James and the “Addled Parliament” on “the issue of common law versus prerogative” (50). This debate, as noted above, was also tied into the disagreement between James and Puritan members of Parliament and the Church over holiday sports. More narrowly, according to Marcus, the play is informed by the debate between the king and the sabbatarian element of Parliament over the legality of the theaters, which were protected by the king’s license. She argues that Jonson exploits the representations of vice in his dramatized carnival to expose the hypocrisy of London citizens who declaimed the abuses of the theaters, which brought money to the king’s coffers, while doing nothing to curb the abuses of fairs, such as Bartholomew Fair, which were under their jurisdiction and which, through the business of the cloth market portion of the fair, brought money into their accounts. According to Marcus, the royalist Jonson saw through the hypocritical abuse of “common law” which prominent citizens were increasingly invoking to justify crossing James’s proclamations. She writes, “Beneath its surface of folly and obfuscation, Bartholomew Fair is a lucid and elegant defense of royal prerogative, particularly the king’s power to ‘license’ plays and pastimes, against those contemporaries who grounded their opposition to such ‘licentious enormities’ in the doctrine of the supremacy of law” (40).

For Marcus then, the moral logic that is worked out in the play in the exposure of the hypocrisy of those who exalt themselves as arbiters and interpreters of the law and justice – particularly Wasp, Busy, and Overdo – against the “enormities” that were typical of both the theater and the fair is a quasi-Christian assertion of the ubiquity of original sin, or what she terms the “\textit{tu quoque}.” “One of the play’s overriding themes,”
she argues, “is the *tu quoque* – let him who is without sin cast the first stone” (40). With specific reference to the play’s “occasion,” the implication is that the members of the London citizenry who complain about the immorality of the theaters should examine the morality of their own sponsored festivals, such Bartholomew Fair and its cloth market, before taking issues with the king’s licensed sports and plays.15

As Marcus’s study implies, though, the moral logic of the *tu quoque* that the play endorses, specifically the social critique it implies that no element of society is “without sin,” extends beyond the comparison of the fair and the theater. That more than the fair’s venality is being satirically exposed is evident from the fact that many of the play’s main characters are not, in fact, typical fair denizens. In fact, the ways in which the fair of the play is *unlike* the real fair is highlighted from the opening of the Induction, where the Stagekeeper criticizes the poet for his representation’s unfaithfulness to the real thing:

When ‘t comes to the Fayre, once: you wer e’en as good goe to Virginia, for any thing there is of Smith-field. Hee has not hit the humors, he do’s not know ‘hem; hee has not conuers’d with the *Bartholomew*-birds, as they say; he has ne’re a Sword, and Buckler man in his Fayre, nor a little Dauy, to take toll o’ the Bawds there, as in my time, nor a Kind-heart, if any bodies teeth should chance to ake in his Play. Nor a Iugler with a wel-educated Ape to come ouer the chaine, for the King of England, and back againe for the Prince, and sit still on his arse for the Pope, and the King of Spaine! None o’ these fine sights! Nor has he the Canuas-cut i’ the night, for a Hobby-horseman to creepe in to his she-neighbour, and take his leap, there! Nothing! (10-22)
While *Bartholomew Fair* may lack the spectacles listed above that are typical of its historical namesake, however, it does contain the spectacle of representative characters of Jacobean society engaging in the kind of immoral venality and disorderliness that had come to be associated with the theater and the fair. These characters may not be typical “Bartholomew-birds,” but, for all that, they are shown to be no less venal than any regular denizens of the fairs or the theaters who were often indicted for pick-pocketing, bawdry, and various other cheats. As Ian McAdam argues in “The Puritan Dialectic of Law and Grace in *Bartholomew Fair,*” one of the key critiques made by the play is the way in which it shows the vices associated with the fair to extend to the whole of Jacobean culture in the decade 1610-1620. McAdam writes of the way that the fair’s vices are identified with characters both high and low in social hierarchy, “The chain of exploitation and victimization [in the fair] permeates all levels of society” (425).

Jonas Barish, like Marcus, reads the play as espousing a moral logic of *tu quoque,* which accounts for the lack of the typical Jonsonian dispensation of justice scene at the play’s end. This play, according to Barish, which “cuts a deep cross section through almost the whole social hierarchy,” depicts the whole of society reduced to a “human” level of “flesh and blood;” everyone is guilty of original sin and thus contributes to the disordered world of the fair (189). Barish, discussing the puppet show which forms the play’s climax, concludes,

Yet the puppet show epitomizes the Fair, which in turn epitomizes the world, a world inhabited by the descendants of Adam. If one is to legislate against folly, where does the legislation stop? And who is so disinfected of flesh and blood as to qualify as a legislator? The old game
of *tu quoque* leads this time to its most drastic conclusion, in which the
morons and numbskulls, without ceasing to incur their maker’s ridicule,
triump over the reformers and justicers. (236)

As these readings by Marcus, McAdam, and Barish note, the follies and “enormities” that
*Bartholomew Fair* exposes and lampoons are not particular to the fair or the theater, but
are endemic to the whole of Jacobean society. The fair does not produce the vices that
are associated with it, it simply gives occasion for vices that are deeply ingrained in
Jacobean culture itself to expose themselves. These vices are less evident and somewhat
buried in the normal everyday world, but at the fair, they are brought to the surface and
revealed.

The occasion that the fair gives for exposure of the folly latent in a character’s
everyday nature is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the fair’s namesake, Master
Bartholomew Cokes. Cokes is described as an “Esquire of Harrow,” an established
gentleman with a country estate and prospects of getting richer through his impending
marriage to Grace Wellborn. However, like the young noble heirs that Jonson criticizes
so harshly in *Underwood* XLIV, Cokes has no concern for his education or his
responsibilities to his estate and his place in the social hierarchy. Rather, he is wholly
taken with whatever material baubles present themselves for his consumption and
whatever temporary diversions – such as songs, games, shows, etc. – present themselves
to his time. His tutor and manservant, Humphrey Wasp, introduces Cokes to the
audience by describing to the gallants Quarlous and Winwife his charge’s chronic
flightiness and the complete ineffectiveness of his education. The description clearly
identifies Cokes, who is still very young in his estate, as completely unready to discharge
the responsibilities of a gentleman:

I haue a young Master, hee is now vpon his making and marring; the
whole care of his well doing, is now mine. His foolish scholemasters haue
done nothing, but runne vp and down the Countrey with him, to beg
puddings, and cake-bread, of his tenants, and almost spoyled him, he has
learn’d nothing, but to sing catches, and repeat rattle bladder rattle, and O,
Madge. I dare not let him walke alone for feare of learning of vile tunes,
which hee will sing at supper, and in the sermon-times! if he meete but a
Carman i’ the streete, and I finde him not talke to keepe him of on him,
hee will whistle him, and all his tunes ouer, at night in his sleepe! he has a
head full of Bees! (1.4.70-81)

While Cokes is unable to learn from his education, he is apparently able to easily
memorize simple and base tunes. He is so inept a gentleman that he does not even have
enough sense of propriety to refrain from singing a profane tune he has just learned at
supper or at church. If Cokes is more childlike and arguably more innocent than the
young gentlemen satirized in Underwood XV and XLIV, these qualities only go to
emphasize his profound foolishness. While London may not tempt him with its more
venal abuses, such as whoring and gambling, it nonetheless gives him occasion to waste
his time and money on other, equally vacuous pursuits. Wasp notes this tendency in
lamenting the troublesome nature of his charge and expressing a wish to get Cokes back
to his country estate. Wasp bemoans,
We ha’bin but a day and a halfe in towne, Gentlemen, ‘tis true; an yester
day I’ the afternoone, we walk’d London, to shewe the City to the
Gentlewoman, he [Cokes] shall marry, Mistresse Grace; but, afore I will
endure such another halfe day, with him, I’l be drawne with a good Gib-
cat, through the great pond at home, as his vncle Hodge was! why, we
could not meet that heathen thing, all day, but stayd him: he would name
you all the Signes ouer, as hee went, aloud, and where hee spi’d a Parrat,
or a Monkey, there hee was pitch’d, with all the little long-coats about
him, male and female; no getting him away! I thought he would ha’ runne
madde o’the blacke boy in Bucklers-bury, that takes the scuruy, roguy
tobacco, there. (1.4.106-118)

Wasp’s laments serve to establish the distracted, puerile, and irresponsible nature of
Cokes at the outset. The fair poses a danger for the young gentleman not so much
because its vicious atmosphere will corrupt him, but because, like a heightened version of
the city itself, it presents occasion for his own natural vices to be exercised and exposed.
The fair is full of the trivial spectacles of the kind that Wasp has had such a time tearing
Cokes away from in the city. In fact, it is Cokes’s ridiculous and fatuous curiosity that
leads him to the fair in the first place; the fair is a natural fit for him, as he acknowledges
when he notes that he and the fair are of a name. After Wasp has expressed horror at the
prospect of his foolish charge going into an environment so congenial to his capricious
folly, Cokes forestalls him with a statement of his resolve to see the fair:

WAS. Blesse me! deliuer me, helpe, hold mee! the Fayre!
COK. Nay, neuer fidge vp and downe, Numpes, and vexe it selfe. I am resolute Bartholmew, in this; I’le make no suite on’t to you; ‘twas all the end of my iourney, indeed, the shew Mistris Grace my Fayre: I call’t my Fayre, because of Bartholmew: you know my name is Bartholmew, and Bartholmew Fayre. (1.5.61-67)

Cokes literally expresses ownership of the fair; its temptations are a perfect fit for his vices. Wasp reinforces the identification of Cokes with the fair when he finally gives up the argument and sardonically encourages his young charge to see the fair, saying, “Would the Fayre and all the Drums, and Rattles in’ t, were i’ your belly for mee: they are already i’ your braine: he that had the meanes to trauell your head, now, should meet finer sights then any are i’ the Fayre” (1.5.91-94). Wasp’s comment shows that the fair’s frivolities are a perfect match for the empty-headed folly of Cokes.

As Wasp fears, the fair proves to be Cokes’s undoing. In the course of his day at the fair, the young gentleman loses his money, his fiancée, and his coat, hat, and sword. Yet Cokes’s misfortunes are almost entirely depicted in the play to be a result of his own foolish nature. He is twice pick-pocketed while being distracted by the spectacles that Wasp has already identified him as being prone to wonder at: first a sermon and then a ballad. Even before his rapture with spectacles renders him victim to thievery, however, he sets about wasting his estate on the worthless baubles that the fair sets before him. As Wasp has predicted, he is too enamored of the “drums” and “rattles” of the fair and cannot resist throwing away his money on these frivolous items. When he first encounters them in the carts of Lantern Leatherhead and Joan Trash, he is immediately taken with them. “Numps,” he exclaims, “here be finer things then any we ha’ bought by
oddes! and more delicate horses, a great deale!” (3.4.22-23). Cokes eventually buys up the entire stock of both Leatherhead and Trash, declaring that their worthless goods will furnish his wedding masque and banquet (3.4.147).

The absurdity of Cokes’s impulsive expenditure is evident when he paints a picture of his wedding day, furnished with the fairings he has purchased from Leatherhead’s and Trash’s carts:

> what a Masque shal I furnish out, for forty shilling? (twenty pound scotsh) and a Banquet of Ginger-bread? there’s a stately thing! . . . and my wedding gloues too? (that I neuer thought on afore.) All my wedding gloues, Ginger-bread? O me! what a deuice will there be? to make ‘hem eate their fingers ends! and delicate Brooches for the Bride-men! and all!” (3.4.157-63).

Cokes’s ridiculously conceived wedding festivities are reminiscent of his dramatic predecessor Sogliardo’s risible coat of arms insignia in *Every Man Out of his Humor*, the “Bore without a head Rampant” (3.4.61).

The similarities between Cokes and Sogliardo are striking: both are fools whose only qualification for their gentility is their wealth. Neither of them is vicious, per se, in the way that the parasitic gulls of *Volpone* are vicious, but nor is either of them possessed of the civic virtues that should belong to someone of their station. Cokes, for instance, is responsible to some extent for the management of his estate, yet his only interactions with his tenants have been to “beg puddings, and cake-bread” from them (1.4.74). He is about to get married, thus placing himself at the head of a landed gentry-class family, yet his wedding plans are those of a fantastical child. Cokes’s childishness in itself, like
Sogliardo’s otherwise harmless foolishness, is an implicit critique of the disordered type of society that results from commercialization of honors and over-valuing of wealth, for while Cokes’s indolent prodigality is decidedly less venial than that of the young nobles that Jonson harshly satirizes in the *Underwood* poems noted above, it is no less frivolous. That is to say, though Cokes may not be as guilty of vices that delegitimize his gentility as the “noble heirs” of *Underwood* XLIV are, neither does he possess any meritorious virtues that legitimate his elevated rank. In fact, insofar as his ineptitude renders him easy prey to the various thieves and cons at the fair, one might say that rather than restraining vice and providing order – as Jonson consistently asserts it is the responsibility of a gentleman to do – Cokes actually enables it. Much like the “noble heirs” and the foolish gentleman Sogliardo, Bartholomew Cokes represents a lack of merit among the Jacobean gentry, and the fair, with all of its baubles and spectacles to distract his childish ineptitude, is the occasion for exposing this lack in his character.

The fair also provides the occasion for the exposure of the vices typical to other social strata in the middle years of James’s reign. Prominent among those satirized are the members of the emergent Puritan middle class, who are represented in *Bartholomew Fair* by the family of Dame Purecraft, and especially by the Banbury Puritan Zeal of the Land Busy. As with Cokes, the vices of these characters are shown to be an integral part of their characters even outside the spatial and temporal confines of the fair; the fair, though, provides a concentrated opportunity for their exposure and ridicule as it does for the indolent gentry in the satirical treatment given to Bartholomew Cokes.

Busy’s puritanical hypocrisy, blindingly obvious as it is, has been observed by many critical readings of the play. In analyzing the ways that Busy’s rhetorical casuistry
butchers logic to justify his pretentious moral pronouncements and his own hypocritical
venality, for example, Barish asserts, “Busy ends by being perhaps the most complete
linguistic imposter in Jonson” (203-4). McDowell identifies Busy with “polemical
stereotype of the Puritan as Jew” in that he is characterized as one of those overly precise
sabbatarian Puritans who, while they “insist on the continued efficacy of Old Testament
law, they hypocritically exclude themselves from censure” (354). McDowell’s article,
“The Stigmatizing of Puritans as Jews in Jacobean England: Ben Jonson, Francis Bacon
and the Book of Sports Controversy,” details the attempts made by allies of James’s
policy regarding Sunday sports to tie the overly strict Sabbath doctrines of the Jacobean
Puritans who opposed the sports to Judaism, thus painting them as a “foreign” threat to
the church and countering the Puritan attempts to tie the religious festivals to Roman
Catholicism. He goes on to provide a fuller description of the construction of Busy’s
character as a stereotypical Jacobean Puritan:

“Rabbi Busy,” as he is called in Jonson’s play, is the most notable
example of the “Stage Puritan,” a character that Patrick Collinson has seen
as instrumental in the polemical construction of Puritanism. Under a
“cloak of specious religiosity” the Stage Puritan, writes Collinson, is
“covetous, seditious and randy” . . . . Busy is described as “a notable
hypocritical vermin,” ruthless in business and “ever in seditious motion,”
affecting the violence of singularity in all that he does. (355)

The “polemical” construction of Puritans that McDowell describes emphatically
represents them as hypocritical and seditious. Both of these vices are abundantly
apparent in the characterization of Busy.

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Busy’s hypocritical “judaizing” surfaces early in the play. He initially
pronounces against the fair as idolatrous and advises Dame Purecraft not to allow her
daughter to indulge her craving for the “heathen . . . Barholmew-pigge,” but when
pressed by Purecraft on account of her daughter’s pregnancy, he agrees that a trip to the
fair may be found to be lawful (1.6.55). After Purecraft asks him if it might be
“otherwise” – i.e. than to abstain from the fair – for her daughter’s sake, Busy replies,

Surely, it may be otherwise, but it is subject, to construction, subject, and
hath a face of offence with the weak, a great face, a foule face, but that
face may haue a vaile put ouer it, and be shadowed, as it were, it may be
eaten, and in the Fayre, I take it, in a Booth, the tents of the wicked: the
place is not much, not very much, we may be religious in the mist of the
prophane, so it be eaten with a reformed mouth, with sobriety, and
humblenesse; not gorg’d with gluttony, or greedinesse; there’s the feare:
for, should she goe there, as taking pride in the place, or delight in the
uncleane dressing, to feed the vanity of the eye, or the lust of the palat, it
were not well, it were not fit, it were abominable, and not good. (1.6.67-79)

Busy’s casuist justification is typical of his what was construed as Puritan hypocrisy. He
betrays the hypocritical nature of his religious quibbling at the outset of this response
when he declares that the foul face of offence to the weak that their presence at the fair
would comprise is actually “subject, to construction” (1.6.67-68). In other words, the
“idolatry” that he has just pronounced fair-going to be, which would be a heinous sin
indeed, is reduced to a subjective matter of interpretation: if viewed in a favorable light,
the “idolatry” might be made to seem less by having “a vail put ouer it” (1.6.70).

Similarly, the denunciation of the fair as a “high place,” a place equated with pagan practices, is reduced in his justification to a point where “the place is not much, not very much” (1.6.72).

As Busy continues to talk himself into the legality of going to the fair, he eventually goes so far as to turn the “foule face” into a fair one: eating pig at the fair may be a virtuous act, “so it be eaten with a reformed mouth, with sobriety, and humblenesse; not gorg’d with gluttony or greedinesse” (1.6.73-75). As his ruminating continues, Busy radically adjusts his position on the fair. Far from being a reprehensible act of idolatry with “a face of offence, with the weake” (1.6.68-9), eating pig at the fair will become a testimony that, instead, builds up the faith of the weak. Busy’s conclusion is a travesty of the apostle Paul’s directions to the ancient church regarding eating meat offered to idols in passages such as Romans 14.16 Busy concludes,

In the way of comfort to the weake, I will goe and eat. I will eate exceedingly, and prophesie; there may be good vse made of it, too, now I thinke on’t: by the publike eating of Swines flesh, to profess our hate, and loathing of Iudaisme, whereof the brethren stand taxed. I will therefore eate, yea, I will eate exceedingly. (1.6.92-97)

The more Busy justifies the visit to the fair, the more he reveals what eventually becomes the obvious reason for his decision to allow it. What makes Busy put a good face on the “idolatry” of the fair is his own propensity to gluttony. As his final resolution to “eate exceedingly” betrays, the mention of Bartholomew Fair pork creates a longing to
eat in Busy, a longing which Win Littlewit only feigns, and so he “constructs” a virtuous motive for attending the fair to eat.

And Busy does indeed eat exceedingly at the fair. Like a hungry hound, he sniffs out Ursula’s pig booth upon their first entrance, by which time Busy has come so far in his justification of this breach of religious purity as to declare that

it were a sinne of obstinacy, great obstinacy, high and horrible obstinacy, to decline, or resist the good titillation of the famelick sense, which is the smell. Therefore be bold (huh, huh, huh) follow the sent. Enter the Tents of the vncleane, for once, and satisfie [Win’s] frailty. Let your fraile wife be satisfied: your zealous mother, and my suffering selfe, will also be satisfied. (3.2.81-87)

Busy’s animal gluttony, signified by his sniffing the air for the sent of pork, has driven him to completely turn his moral view of the fair to its opposite; the “foule face” of eating pig at the fair has now become a virtue from which it would be a “sinne” to abstain. Again, Busy cannot help but voice his own hope of indulging, closing his sophistical moralizing with an anticipation of his own satisfaction.

Busy’s actual feasting takes place off stage, but it is clearly implied that he has gorged himself on Ursula’s pork. After they have paid the reckoning, Littlewit convinces his wife to fall “into her fit of longing again” so that they may see the rest of the fair (3.6.39-40). When Purecraft announces that her daughter is in another fit, Busy replies, “For more pig? there is no more, is there?” (3.6.41). Busy’s reply signifies that they have eaten all of the pork that Ursula’s booth had ready to serve, and his inquiry as to whether
there is any more implies that if there were, he would be more than willing to resume eating.

The episodes surrounding the visit of the Puritan-leaning Littlewit clan to the fair reveal and satirize the stereotypical hypocrisy that was often ascribed to Jacobean Puritanism, and particularly critique the hypocrisy of their declamations upon the theaters and other “sports” on the grounds that they were places that accommodated all kinds of venal sins. Busy, for instance, explicitly identifies the eating of pig at the fair not only with idolatry, but with gluttony, yet his religious objections are shown to be based not on moral absolutes but religious constructions, constructions which may be easily cast aside in the face of his own venal longings. The imperative to avoid the temptation to gluttony may be dismissed when he, himself, is hungry. Dame Purecraft anticipates Busy’s shifting morals and situational ethics when, initially responding to the news of Win’s cravings, she calls for the lay preacher to determine whether their visit to the fair is morally allowable. Knowing already that Puritans were supposed to eschew the “evils” of the fair, she nonetheless calls for Busy to see “if [going to the fair] can be any way made, or found lawfull” (1.6.30-31). This hasty construction of moral justifications for their venal longings on the part of the Puritans in the play exposes their professed observance of the absolute morals of “proper” Christian religion to be a hypocritical sham; their “morality” is, in fact, constructed according to their own whim.

Moreover, consistent with the construction of Puritans as hypocritical judaisers who refuse “to heed the Christian message of charity,” the Puritans in the play are, themselves, often those who are most guilty of the faults that they so vociferously condemn (McDowell 354). Busy, after all, is the one who is in chief violation of the sins
he associates with the fair. His charge of idolatry is based upon the fact that the fair was
in honor of St. Bartholomew, and English puritans identified Roman Catholic veneration
of the saints with idolatry. Busy, though, is the only one in the play who seems to be
even marginally aware of the fair’s religious connotations, so the only one to violate his
religious conscience by attending the fair is Busy, himself. Moreover, though he justifies
eating at the fair only if it be done without gluttony, he apparently gorges himself on the
pork until it is gone. Busy’s hypocritical gluttony, in as much as it is a representative
stereotypical Puritan construction, implicitly satirizes Jacobean Puritanism for
contributing to social disorder by constraining the consciences of public with their bogus
and over-precise moralism. Moreover, because the precise Puritan asceticism is
putatively based on the authority of scripture – the ultimate authority in Puritan rhetoric –
the moral constraints of Puritan preaching pose an implicit challenge to the supremacy of
the Crown and the established Church in matters ecclesiastical. As noted above, from the
time of the Hampton Court Conference, James had seen such challenges to royal
supremacy as seditious and tending to the disorder of the Commonwealth. Jonson’s
royalist satire of the hypocrisy of the Puritans in *Bartholomew Fair* undercuts the piety of
their ascetic moralizing as false and constructed.

Moreover, Busy’s gluttony, like Cokes’s prodigality, is revealed in the play to be
not the product of the venal environment of the fair, as he might claim, but a vice that is
all his own and, again, typical of the contemporary construction of the Puritan as
hypocrite. The fair does not make him a glutton; he is guilty of that sin even outside the
fairgrounds. Before going to the fair, for example, when Purecraft calls for Busy to help
her determine the lawfulness of their visit, he is found to be ravenously, almost
barbarically, raiding her cupboards. John Littlewit, who has been sent to fetch him, says that he will come, “Presently, mother, as soone as he has cleans’d his beard. I found him, fast by the teeth, i’ the cold Turkey-pye, i’ the cupboard, with a great white loafe on his left hand, and a glasse of Malmesey on his right” (1.6.33-36). From his first mention in the play, he is found stuffing his gob so enthusiastically that he has food and drink in both hands and his “teeth.” He has been eating so voraciously that he has to clean his beard before entering the room.

Gluttony is not the only vice that Busy displays at the fair, though. Once he has finished eating exceedingly, he takes to prophesying. Not surprisingly, the Puritan’s exhortation is against the evils of the fair as a relic of the papacy. Busy’s preaching against the idolatry of the fair would not of itself be such a vice, perhaps, if it were more restrained and orderly. But his zeal is given to causing an uproar. As Jordan Knockem, the horse courser, comments, “An excellent right Hypocrite! now his belly is full, he falls a railing and kicking, the Iade” (3.6.47-48). Busy’s zealous fury against the fair reaches such a pitch that he overturns the carts of Leatherhead and Trash, proclaiming against the former’s hobbyhorses as “fierce and rancke Idoll[s]” and the latter’s gingerbread as a “basket of Popery, thy nest of Images: and whole legend of ginger-work” (3.6.56-7, 73-4). When Dame Purecraft, seeing that Busy is disturbing the peace with his racket, attempts to calm him, he furiously replies, “Hinder me not, woman. I was mou’d in spirit, to bee here, this day, in this Faire, this wicked, and foule Faire; and fitter may it be called a foule, then a Faire: To protest against the abuses of it, the foule abuses of it” (3.6.86-89). Busy zealously rails against the lawless abuses of the fair, but in his
hypocritical blindness, he fails to realize that he, himself, is the chief element of lawlessness and disorder at this instant.

Moreover, his grandstanding style of preaching seems more designed to draw attention to himself than it does to reform anyone’s morals. He almost subconsciously betrays his motives when he embraces his martyrdom in the stocks, saying to his jailors, “I doe obey thee, the Lyon may roare, but he cannot bite. I am glad to be thus separated from the heathen of the land, and put apart in the stocks, for the holy cause” (4.6.85-87). Busy embraces his martyrdom as if he is sharing in the tradition of being persecuted with the prophets, apostles, and Christ himself. But whereas Christ suffered silently, Busy uses his platform in the stocks “to prophesie the destruction of Fayres and May-games, Wakes, and Whitson-ales” (4.6.90-91).

This is not the first time that Puritan preaching is satirized as self-serving grandstanding in Jonsonian comedy. In The Alchemist, for example, Subtle notes it as a distinctively Puritan trait in selling his philosopher’s stone to Tribulation Wholesome and the deacon Ananias. Subtle tells Tribulation that the “brethren” will no longer be forced to such histrionic and overly scrupulous shows of religion in order to gain influence and money once they have the stone; they shall not need their special tunes,

No, nor your holy vizard, to winne widdowes
To giue you legacies; or make zealous wiues
To rob their husbands, for the common cause:

Nor shall you need, ore-night to eate huge meales,
To celebrate your next daies fast the better:

17
The whilst the Brethren, and the Sisters, humbled,
Abate the stiffenesse of the flesh. Nor cast
Before our hungrie hearers, scrupulous bones,
As whether a Christian may hawke, or hunt. (3.2.69-79)

Subtle alleges that English Puritans have undertaken these sorts of ostentatiously
religious and attention-getting antics in order to gain the money and influence that comes
with the extra congregants that their shenanigans draw into their fold, such as the
“widdowes” and “zealous wiues.” Subtle continues with the litany of abuses that the
puritans can forego once they have the stone: “Nor shall you need to libell ‘gainst the
Prelates,/ . . . . Nor, of necessitie, / Raile against playes, to please the Alderman, / Whose
daily custard you deuour. Nor lie / With zealous rage, till you are hoarse” (3.2.86-91).

Tribulation, expecting that he will soon have the power of the stone, admits the
ostentatious hypocrisy of which Subtle accuses his religion: “Truely, sir, they are /
Wayes, that the godly Bretheren haue inuented, / For the propagation of the glorious
cause” (3.2.97-99).

The self-aggrandizing religious showiness of which Tribulation admits the
brethren to be guilty is the same sort of attention-getting religious hypocrisy that Busy
exhibits at the fair. As with his gluttony, though, these character traits are not a product
of the fair itself, but of his everyday character. The young gallant Quarlous describes
Busy’s habitual penchant for disorder and self-aggrandizement early in the play. When
he hears Busy’s name mentioned by Littlewit, Quarlous says, “I know him. One that
stands vpon his face, more then his faith, at all times; Euer in seditious motion, and
reprouing for vaine-glory: of a most lunatique conscience, and spleen, and affects the
violence of Singularity in all he do’s” (1.3.136-139). Quarlous further testifies to Busy’s willingmess to do harm to others with his “zeal” and notes his hypocritical claim of guiltlessness: “(He has undone a Grocer here, in Newgate-market, that broke with him, trusted him with Currans, as errant a Zeale as he, that’s by the way:) by his profession, hee will euer be i’t the state of Innocence, though” (1.3.40-43). Busy, it appears, is routinely given to creating disorderly scenes with his zealous preaching and has no qualms about who he undoes with his display, so long as he brings the desired attention to himself. Again, as with his ascetic moralizing, the ostensibly pious motives of the Puritan preacher are undermined and exposed as hypocrisy.

The hypocrisy of the Puritan characters in the play is, along with the lack of meritorious virtue in the play’s gentry, a cause of the social disorder and chaos that pervades the fair during the course of the comedy. While the gentry at the fair – represented in large part by Cokes and Overdo – provide no virtuous example or meritorious leadership for society to order itself around, the hypocritical Puritans exacerbate the disorder by challenging the authority of any established social or ecclesiastical power structure that does exist, up to and including the authority of the Crown as the sanctioning agency of religious festivals such as the fair. The effect is, again, a disordered society in which no reliable moral authority presents itself.

The exposure of the zealous and seditious hypocrisy of the Puritans in the play is matched by the exposure of the hypocrisy and presumption of the common law judges in the satiric treatment of the justice of the peace, Adam Overdo. At the beginning of the fair, Overdo sets for himself the task of searching out and reforming the fair’s typical
vices, the “enormities” of the place, as he calls them. Disguised as a madman so that nobody will recognize him, Overdo confidently proclaims,

I Adam Ouerdoo, am resolu’d therefore, to spare spy-money hereafter, and make mine owne discoueries. Many are the yeerely enormities of this Fayre, in whose courts of Pye-poulders I haue had the honour during the three dayes sometimes to sit a judge. But this is the speciall day for detection of those foresaid enormities. Here is my black booke, for the purpose; this [disguise] the cloud that hides me: vnder this couert I shall see, and not be seene. On, Iunius Burtus. And as I began, so I’ll end: in Justice name, and the Kings; and for the Commonwealth. (2.1.39-49)

In the spirit of Sir Edward Coke, who advocated for the necessary ultimate judicial authority of common law justices, Overdo presumptuously sets himself up as arbiter of the fair to punish enormities and set wrongs right. Invoking the name of Brutus, a legendary defender of the rule of law, he rather proudly identifies himself with justice.

Almost immediately, however, the justice shows himself to be devoid of any competent ability to judge the relative innocence or guilt of persons. While loitering in disguise at Ursula’s, Overdo takes the pickpocket Edgeworth, at first sight, as a virtuous young man whose virtue is endangered by the company he keeps. What is more, he identifies Edgeworth as an exemplar of the endangered decent youth of the kingdom: “What pity ‘tis, so ciuill a young man should haunt this debaucht company? here’s the bane of the youth of our time apparent. A proper penman, I see’t in his countenance, he has a good Clerks looke with him, and I warrant him a quicke hand” (2.4.30-34). Of course, the only part of his estimation that Overdo gets right is the guess that Edgeworth
has “a quicke hand.” Far from being endangered by his companions, Edgeworth is the actual cutpurse in a thieving ring. Overdo’s discernment in ascribing innocence to the cutpurse Edgeworth is not only faulty for how completely wrong he is, but also for his jumping to the conclusion without having seen any evidence upon which to base his decision. Coke, it will be remembered, had argued that it was necessary that the common law judges needed to have final authority of judgment – i.e. their verdicts not being overturned by the Court of Chancery – in order to properly dispense justice. If the undiscerning Overdo is representative of a typical common law justice of the peace, then his ineptitude seems to indicate that the success of Coke’s challenge to the Crown’s judicial authority would not tend at all toward the promotion of civil justice and order.

Overdo’s judgment is shown to be questionable throughout the action of the play, as he continues, risibly, to plot a rescue of the “virtuous” Edgeworth from his unwholesome circumstances, but capricious judgment and temperamental verdicts are revealed by the comments of other characters to be typical of Overdo’s normal judiciary practice. When the watchmen Haggis and Bristle put Overdo in the stocks, for instance, and are harrassed by the madman Troubleall regarding their acting without a warrant, their conversation following his departure testifies to Overdo’s temperamental nature as a judge:

HAG. Before me, Neighbour Bristle (and now I think on’t better) Justice Overdoo, is a very parantory person.

BRI. O! are you aduis’d of that? and a seuere Justicer by your leaue. . . .

He will sit as vpright o’ the bench, an’ you marke him, as a candle i’ the socket, and giue light to the whole Court in euery businesse.
HAG. But he will burne blew, and swell like a bile (God blesse vs) an’ he be angry.

BRI. I, and hee will be angry too, when him list, that’s more: and when hee is angry, be it right or wrong; hee has the Law on’s side euer. I marke that too. (4.1.69-81)

The madman Troubleall himself is a living testament to Overdo’s “parantory” nature. His madness, as Bristle relates, is a result of his having been dismissed from service by Overdo: “he was an officer in the Court of Pie-poulders, here last yeere, and put out on his place by Iustice Ouerdoo... Vpon which, he took an idle conceipt, and’s runne made vpon’t. So that euer since, hee will doe nothing, but by Iustice Ouerdoo’s warrant, he will not eate a crust, nor drinke a little, nor make him his apparel, ready.” (4.1.54-60).

The specific cause of Troubleall’s termination is not related, but the nature of his madness, that he will not do the most basic things without Overdo’s warrant, suggests that the justice released him rather unjustly for acting without his specific approval. Such an act would be consistent with the peremptory and self-important attitude that Overdo displays throughout the play. Overdo’s poor judgment is so obvious that even he seems to admit and repent of his guilt – in the case of Troubleall, at least – when he hears of it: “If this be true, this is my greatest disaster! how am I bound to satisfie this poore man, that is of so good a nature to mee, out of his wits!” (4.1.63-65).

Overdo’s final acts of misjudgment are carried out in the play’s final act, at the puppet show. Here, Overdo’s justice is revealed to be ridiculously blind – not in the sense of impartiality, but in the sense of a complete inability to see clearly. He first betrays his inability to discern rightly when he is relieved to see his “care” Edgeworth in
better company. When he spies the cutpurse with Knockem, Whit, Win Littlewit, and his own wife, he expresses relief: “Here is my care come! I like to see him in so good company; and yet I wonder that persons of such fashion, should resort hither!” (5.4.36-38). The comic irony of Overdo’s blindness works on many levels. In the first sense, Edgeworth is in much the same company that Overdo has seen him in before, though now he and his cohorts are dressed up in stolen garb to see the show. Secondly, Win and Madam Overdo, the two who most clearly exhibit “the fashion” have been recruited and dressed by Knockem as prostitutes; Overdo thus mistakes the garb of prostitutes for “the fashion.” What is perhaps most damning is that Overdo doesn’t recognize his wife, Alice, in their presence, dressed as a fashionable whore.

The failure to recognize his own wife is what proves to be Overdo’s final exposure and undoing. When all of the play’s characters have gathered at the close of the puppet show, Overdo decides to reveal himself and dispense with Justice: “It is time, to take Enormity by the fore head, and brand it; for I haue discouer’d enough” (5.5.125-26). This introduction to the final scene seems like it is leading into one of the trial scenes that typically ends Jonson’s comedies, with justice being dispensed upon the offenders, but since Overdo is incompetent in his discernment, the judgment goes all awry. That Overdo’s judgment will fail is hinted at by the overweening and bombastic self-righteousness with which he announces that he is about to give his verdicts:

Now, to my enormities: looke vpon mee, O London! and see mee, O Smithfield; The example of Iustice, and Mirror of Magistrates: the true top of formality, and scourge of enormity. Harken vnto my labours, and but obserue my discoueries; and compare Hercules with me, if thou dars’t,
of old; or Columbus; Magellan; or our countrye man Drake of later times:

stand forth, you weedes of enormity, and spread. (5.6.33-40)

Such a pompous claim by a character in a Jonsonian comedy can only set him up for satiric exposure and ridicule, and such is the case with Overdo. As he runs through a list of characters and their abuses – notably excepting the “easie and honest” Edgeworth (5.6.44) – he ends by unmasking Littlewit’s wife, who he has since learned is an adulterous prostitute, as his exposure of the “chiefest enormity” (5.4.54). No sooner has he unmasked Win, though, than his own wife is revealed to be not only a prostitute as well, but also drunk to the point of being sick (5.6.67). The revelation completely undercuts Overdo’s authority, as his own family is implicated in the “enormities” of the fair, of which he claims to be the “scourge.” Like the Puritans of the comedy, the justice’s righteous pose is comically exposed as a hypocritical stance, and, as with Busy, Overdo’s peremptory and faulty judgment is revealed as an abuse to which he is prone all the time, and for which the fair only provides the occasion for exposure and ridicule.

Like the seditious zeal of the Puritan Busy, the presumptuous overtures to judicial authority of Overdo are shown to actually produce disorder in society rather than the peace he is entrusted to keep. His foolish scheme to spend the day in disguise to sniff out “enormities” has as its only effect the removal of any orderliness that his presence in the court of Pie-Powders might have otherwise commanded. Overdo fails not only as a judge, though, but also as a gentleman. Like his brother-in-law Cokes, Overdo is a gentleman whose merits do not match the level of his rank. Though it is not certain that Overdo holds his office because of his wealth, as so many of the unmeritorious gentlemen in Jonsonian comedy do, it is relatively certain that he has not been promoted
to his office because he has been shown to possess the virtues of a judge. Thus in the play’s satiric portrayal of unmeritorious gentlemen – Overdo and his brother-in-law Cokes – *Bartholomew Fair* dramatizes the disorder that results from a vacuum of virtuous leadership in its gentry. That disorder is made worse by the challenges to the traditional authorities of church and state that come from the play’s hypocritical Puritans and presumptuous common law judge. In this comedy then, the social disorder of the fair presents a satirically revealing mirror of the relative disorder of an everyday Jacobean culture that, as a result of the corruption and commercialization of patronage and the challenges to traditional feudal and ecclesiastical authority structures, was, according to Jonson’s *Underwood* poems XV and XLIV, in something of the same moral disorder.

The fair’s carnival atmosphere mirrors several other social vices that Jonson’s non-dramatic verses impute to Jacobean culture at this time as well. In the adulterous prostitution of Win Littlewit and Alice Overdo, for example, the play satirizes the adulterous habits of Jacobean gentlewomen. Adultery is a vice that Jonson associates with court ladies several times in his non-dramatic poetry as well as his comedies. His epigram, “To Fine Lady Woud-Be” (LXII) accuses its target of chronic illicit pregnancies and abortions. The *Underwood* poem (XLIX) “An Epigram on The Court Pucell” similarly accuses its target of loose sexual behaviors (30-35). *Underwood* XV, mentioned above for its thoroughgoing satire of the corruption of London culture, is perhaps most explicit in its indictment of the city as a seedbed of adultery. That poem’s satiric speaker rails,

> Adulteries now, are not so hid, or strange,

> They’re growne Commoditie upon Exchange;
He that will follow but anothers wife,
Is lov’d though he let out his owne for life:
The Husband now’s call’d churlish, or a poore
Nature, that will not let his Wife be a whore;
Or use all arts, or haunt all Companies
That may corrupt her, even in his eyes. (85-92)

The actions surrounding the prostitution of Win Littlewit and Alice Overdo are a comic parody of the vices the above poems attribute to gentle English society. Knockem articulates what appears to be contemporary London thought on the matter when he is trying to con Win Littlewit into being a part of his prostitution ring by telling her that adultery is inherent to the life of a “Lady.” He says that in the circles of gentility, “it is the vapour of spirit in the wife, to cuckold, now a daies; as it is the vapour of fashion, in the husband, not to suspect” (4.5.50-51). His cohort, Captain Whit, chimes in, “Mend then, and doe euery ting like a Lady, hereafter, neuer know ty husband, from another man” (4.5.54-55). Knockem and Whit’s arguments might be taken as only so much rhetoric employed in the attempt to recruit a woman to their bawdry, but their assertions are reinforced later in the scene when Punque Alice, a prostitute by trade, enters from Ursula’s tent beating Dame Overdo because she thinks the “lady” is at the fair trying to steal her clientele. Alice complains, “The poore common whores can ha’ no traffique, for the priuy rich ones; your caps and hoods of veluet, call away our customers, and lick the fat from vs” (4.5.69-71). The adulterous habits of court ladies are also admitted – and proudly at that – by Lady Eitherside in The Devil is an Ass, who like Alice Overdo, is a justice’s wife (4.4.95-99).
The fair’s events also expose the corruption of the Jacobean Court of Wards as a means of income for those who held wardships in the portrayal of Grace Wellborn’s wardship to Justice Overdo, who has determined to keep the wealth of her estate in his family by inequitably marrying her to his fool of a brother-in-law, Bartholomew Cokes. Jonson’s play is emphatically clear in its depiction of the injustice done by the Court of Wards in matters such as this. Grace relates her unfortunate plight to Quarlous and Winwife as follows: “Faith, through a common calamity, [Overdo] bought me, Sir; and now he will marry me to his wiues brother, this wise Gentleman [Cokes], that you see, or else I must pay value o’ my land” (3.5.273-76). Grace’s situation is not only unjust, it is all too typical of many female wards whose estates were entirely in the control of an often unscrupulous male guardian. She describes it as “a common calamity.” The way that the license of marriage for Cokes and Grace is stolen, argued over, and generally passed about during the course of the day at the fair is merely a hyperbolic and satiric critique of the way that young gentlewomen were routinely reduced to commodities by the Court of Wards.

Taken in all, Jonson employs the festival, disorderly site of the fair in *Bartholomew Fair* as an accentuated showcase for prominent social vices of the middle years of James’s reign. L. A. Beaurline’s discussion of this comedy in *Jonson and Elizabethan Comedy* asserts, “As the denizens of the Fair are corrupt, so they corrupt or exacerbate the silliness and fraud of those who visit it” (214). Beaurline’s assertion is supported by the comments of the gallant Quarlous after he has procured Grace’s marriage license from Edgeworth, whom he has employed to steal it from Wasp. Having handed over the license, Edgeworth invites Quarlous to join him in partaking of “a silken
gowne, a veluet petticoate, or a wrought smocke” at Ursula’s (4.6.19-20). Quarlous’s response expresses his horrified distaste that Edgeworth thinks him to be one of his own:

Keepe it for your companions in beastliness, I am none of ‘hem, Sir. If I had not already forgien you a greater trespasse, or thought you yet worth my beating, I would instruct your manners, to whom you made your offers. But goe your wayes, talke not to me, the hangman is onely fit to discourse with you; the hand of the Beadle is too merciful a punishment for your Trade of life. (4.6.22-28)

After he has dismissed the rebuked Edgeworth, however, Quarlous is regretfully faced with the fact that he has, in fact, been complicit in Edgeworth’s thievery. He did, in point of fact, employ Edgeworth to steal the document. Upon realization of this fact, Quarlous has a moment of repentant reflection: “I am sorry I employ’d this fellow; for he thinks me such: \textit{Facinus quos inquinat, æquat}” (4.6.28-30). The Latin, from Lucan’s \textit{Pharsalia}, translates as, “Crime levels distinctions among those it corrupts.” Quarlous blames his vice on the corrupting influence of the fair, but like the other characters whose vices the fair exposes, Quarlous’s vice is a product of his own character and his normal, everyday bearing, not the fair itself. The play characterizes Quarlous as a mischievous young gallant after the pattern of \textit{Every Man in his Humor’s} Wellbred or Epicene’s Truewit, who is given habitually to the kinds of rough practical jokes like the one he plays on Wasp and Cokes in stealing the marriage license. While it may be justice in the logic of Jonsonian satire to dupe such a fool as Cokes, Quarlous is still guilty of the crime, especially since he has employed a professional criminal like Edgeworth to carry out his scheme. His protestation attempts to maintain a distinction between himself and
the criminal element represented by Edgeworth, but as his reflection shows, the distinction is leveled.

Barish notes that the kinetic, contentious quality that is typical of Jonson’s gallant satiric expositors like Wellbred and Truewit is increased at the fair, resulting in an “increasingly close identification of the satiric commentator with the world on which he comments, the abandonment of his special position” (194). The distinction that separates Quarlous from the criminal element on which he comments is erased. Likely it is his realization of his own implication in the vices of the fair that leads him in the comedy’s final scene to recommend that Justice Overdo abandon his plan of punishing the day’s enormities and, instead, invite everyone to feast at his house in a spirit of forgiveness:

nay, Sir, stand not you fixt here, like a stake in Finsbury to be shot at . . .
but get your wife out o’ the ayre, it wil make her worse else; and
remember you are but Adam, Flesh, and blood! you haue your frailty,
forget your other name of Ouerdoo, and inuite vs all to supper. There you
and I will compare our discoueries; and drowne the memory of all
enormity in your bigg’st bowle at home. (5.5.93-100)

In exhorting the pretentious judge of his own human frailty, Quarlous identifies with him himself. He has already discovered that he is prone to the weaknesses of flesh and blood, and therefore he will share in the “bowle” of grace with Overdo. Justice must be thrown out, because there is nobody present who is sufficiently righteous to enforce it.

Doubtless it is this atypically gracious ending of Bartholomew Fair, in which the entire community is brought together to feast and justice is suspended, that has led so many critics to identify the play with the spirit of carnival, which, after all, forms the
context of its action. The fact that justice is suspended, however, does not necessarily
dull the barbs directed at the vices represented in the play. As Beauvine argues, “If we
acknowledge . . . the play’s special defense of idle pleasure, its tentative affirmation of
life and acceptance of our humanity in a more generous spirit than Jonson was able to
conjure up earlier in his career, we still cannot forget the coarseness of that life present in
every scene” (215). Though the carnival atmosphere of the fair refrains from
condemning the social vices it reveals, in nonetheless exposes them and, in the context of
the comedy, treats them to their deserved ridicule. Truly, as Marcus argues, Jonson
“[has] it both ways” (38).

Jonson’s method of joining the classical and the carnival in this play can be seen
most clearly in how he employs the satirical servant character of the play, Humphrey
Wasp. Wasp is the dramatic successor to clever servants like Brainworm and Mosca,
who are, themselves, revivals of the classical clever slave. Wasp’s similarities to the
clever slave of Roman New Comedy are relatively muted, but present nonetheless. He is
arguably clever, subversive and witty in his dialogue, and from the point in the play
where he assumes control of the marriage license, he is in charge of bringing to fruition
his young master’s romantic interests. On the other hand, Wasp is not very involved in
clever schemes that dupe the gulls – this is left to Quarrous – nor does he succeed in
overseeing his master’s romantic interests. There is, however, a precedent and possible
source for Wasp’s character in Plautus’s Bacchides, in the character of Lydus, the
pedagogue slave of Philoxenus and tutor of Pistoclerus. Like Wasp, Lydus is constantly
upbraiding the morals of his charge, Pistoclerus, but to no avail. Like his predecessors,
Wasp is in the service of a young Master, Bartholomew Cokes, yet, his social position is
not clear, for he is a tutor rather than a servingman, per se. Barish notes, “Wasp, unlike the rest of the dramatis personae, belongs to no clearly defined social or professional category” (213). In this regard, Wasp is again like Carlo Buffone, the tavern raider and Aristophanic expositor from *Everyman Out of his Humor*. The parallels between Buffone and Wasp extend beyond their vague social position: Wasp is a tutor to the fool Bartholomew Cokes, while Buffone is a sort of guide to the fool Sogliardo; also, both Wasp and Buffone are given to biting and scurrilous jests at the faults of others. Wasp’s pugnacious and bawdy nature is established early in the play. While waiting for the marriage license at Littlewit’s house in the first act, he becomes impatient with waiting for Win, who has been sent to fetch it, and lashes out at Littlewit when the scrivener attempts to calm him:

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Good Master Hornet, turd i’ your teeth, hold you your tongue; doe not I know you? your father was a Pothecary, and sold glisters, more then he gaue, I wusse: and turd i’ your little wiues teeth too (here she comes) ’twill make her spit, as fine as she is, for all her velvet-custerd on her head, Sir. (1.4.53-58)
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Wasp’s barbs, like Buffone’s, tend to deflate their victims, as he here deflates Littlewit’s profession by noting him the son of an apothecary who dealt in giving enemas.

Though Wasp has more in common with the tavern jester Buffone, his view of himself has more in common with that of Macilente, the scholar-satirist of *Every Man Out of his Humor*. Like Macilente, Wasp sees it as his duty to verbally scourge and so reform the vices and follies of those around him, particularly his charge, Cokes. Throughout the play, Wasp unleashes his verbal furor on his young master, reproving
him for his prodigality, his foolish irresponsibility, and his proneness to distraction. For instance, when he learns of Cokes’s intention to go to the fair, Wasp upbraids his young master’s distracted inability to keep his estate in the chaos of the fair where the crowds and the shops present so many occasions for losing and spending:

If he goe to the Fayre, he will buy of euery thing, to a Baby there; and household-stuffe for that too. If a legge or an arme on him did not grow on, hee would lose it i’ the presse. Pray heauen I bring him off with one stone! And then he is such a Rauener after fruite! you will not beleue what a coyle I had, t’other day, to compound a businesse betweene a Katerne-peare-woman, and him, about snatching! ’tis intolerable Gentlemen. (1.5.113-120)

When Cokes loses his first purse to a pickpocket because he is distracted by Overdo’s sermon at Ursula’s, Wasp excoriates him with a sarcastic reproof for the young man’s ignoring his advice. Cokes curses cutpurses, and Wasp replies,

Blesse ‘hem with all my heart, with all my heart, do you see! Now, as I am no Infidell, that I know of, I am glad on’t. I, I am, (here’s my witnesse!) doe you see, Sir? I did not tell you of his [Overdo’s] fables, I? no, no, I am a dull malt-horse, I, I know nothing. Are you not iustly seru’d i’ your conscience now? speake i’ your conscience. Much good doe you with all my heart, and his good heart that has it, with all my heart againe. (2.6.106-113)

Wasp’s speech is bitter with frustrated sarcasm at the obstinate foolishness of his charge. Like Macilente, he is acridly indignant that the fruits of his learning and reproof are
largely ignored. He displays the same sort of vitriol later when he cannot talk Cokes out of purchasing the bunch of worthless merchandise from the carts of Leatherhead and Trash. He rails at his charge, “A resolute fool, you are, I know, and a very sufficient Coxcombe; with all my heart; nay, you have it, Sir, and you be angry, 'turd i’ your teeth twice: (if I said it not once afore) and much good doe you” (3.4.42-45).

After Cokes is pickpocketed a second time, Wasp decides that, since his charge will not listen to reproof and correct his errors, he will keep hold of the marriage license himself, lest the young fool jeopardize his future by losing his marriage prospects. Taking the case that holds the license from Cokes, he responds to his young master’s inquiry as to why he’s doing it with,

Why? because you are an Asse, Sir, there’s a reason the shortest way, and you will needs ha’ it; now you ha’ got the trick of losing, you’ld lose your breech, an’t were loose. I know you, Sir, come, deliver, you’ll goe and cracke the vermine, you breed now, will you? ‘tis very fine, will you ha’ the truth on’t? they are such retchlesse flies as you are, tha blow cutpurses abroad in euery corner; your foolish hauing of money, makes ‘hem. . . . I would teach your wit to come to your head, Sir, as well as your land to come into your hand, I assure you, Sir. (3.5.216-227)

As Macilente does with the foolish gulls in *Every Man Out of his Humor*, here Wasp indicts and reproves Cokes for his errors, and establishes his wisdom as the source of virtues whereby Cokes should reform. Moreover, he critiques Cokes as an example of a broad social vice; his charge is only one of many young, prodigal, and rich fools. And as many of Jonson’s clever servants have done before, he takes upon himself the
responsibility of seeing his master’s interests through. Since Cokes cannot seem to help losing things, Wasp will keep the license.

Unlike his clever servant predecessors in Jonsonian comedy though, Wasp fails to see his master’s interests through. Wasp loses the license when he, himself, is distracted by being drawn into drinking and playing the game of “vapours” with Knockem and his crew outside Ursula’s. When the game degenerates into a brawl, largely because Wasp’s scurrilous insults provoke it, Edgeworth takes advantage of the confusion to steal the license. Wasp becomes guilty of the very folly he has ridden Cokes so hard for. His pugnacity and apparent taste for bottle ale cause him to lose the license, which he had taken from Cokes for safe keeping. This falling into the very errors of the gulls that he excoriates distinguishes Wasp from his satiric servant predecessors. Barish analyzes Wasp’s fall as follows: “The satiric commentator of an earlier period, who remained scornfully aloof, passing judgment on the procession of fools, has become, in this instance, the frenzied busybody whose passionate exposures of the folly in others serves only to expose it the more damningly in himself” (215). Thus, like Quarlous and Overdo, Wasp is made to realize his own implication in the vices that he criticizes in others, and because of this implication, his satiric effectiveness suffers, as he notes when he finds out that Cokes knows he has been in the stocks. Wasp laments, “Do’s he know that? nay, then the date of my Authority is out; I must think no longer to raigne, my gouernment is at an end. He that will correct another, must want fault in himself” (5.4.97-100). When he further finds out that Quarlous has duped him of the marriage license, he gives up his satiric vocation completely: “I will neuer speak while I liue, againe, for outght I know” (5.6.103-4). As with the other characters, Wasp’s vicious proclivities – his penchant to
rail and his overbearing taste for bottle ale – have been exacerbated and exposed by the fair.

Wasp’s implication in the vices of the fair is instructive in understanding Jonson’s comic method in *Bartholomew Fair*. As the servant satirist in the play, Wasp is ostensibly the source of moral satire in the play, as his predecessors have been. His implication in the chaos of the fair is parallel to the subsumption of the classical comic plot into the carnival disorder of the fair’s festive setting, which, in turn, is satirically critical of the disorder of mid-1610s Jacobean society. As has been illustrated above, the vices that are exposed at the fair, for the most part, belong to the everyday habits of the London citizens in the play. The vices, that is, are particular to the characters and to the social types that they satirically represent: Bartholomew Cokes and the frivolous young gentry, for instance, or Zeal of the Land Busy and the seditious hypocritical Puritan. The carnival atmosphere of the fair provides a place in which to bring these typical London vices together and thus present a concentrated representation of the disorder that characterized much of London society. In the concentrated disorder of the fair, however, the vices are so concentrated that the possibility for dispensing justice according to virtue and merit, a dispensation that typically closes Jonsonian neoclassical comedy, is a practical impossibility. However, as much as Jonson’s neoclassical comic plot is swallowed in festival disorder, it still retains its social critique. Wasp’s satiric censures of Cokes still ring true in their indictment of youthful aristocratic prodigality, even if he is shown to be guilty of prodigality himself. Quarlous’s duping plots still expose his victims as gulls. Even the majority of Overdo’s denunciation of the fair’s “enormities” hit their critical mark. If the satiric expositors are implicated in the vices of the fair, their
implication only serves to heighten the social critique by identifying the typically Jonsonian classical comedy of manners with the carnival festivity of the fair.

Eugene Waith’s edition of *Bartholomew Fair* notes the combination of classical and medieval dramaturgical methods in the play, specifically with regards to its staging. Waith draws parallels between the booths of the fair and the booths of medieval mystery drama and then concludes,

If *Bartholomew Fair* was staged in the manner I have described, it is one of the clearest examples of the survival in the Elizabethan public theater of the essentially medieval tradition of simultaneous staging, and at the same time suggests something of the classical convention. While the “special decorum” of the Fair relates the spectacle to contemporary Smithfield, the booths recall the mansions of the old mysteries and, more dimly, the houses of Plautus and Terence. (217)

In the third volume of *Early English Stages 1300-1660*, Glynne Wickham details the affinity between medieval drama and holiday festivals of the church calendar in the England of the late Middle Ages. He notes that both the theater and the festival implied a “celebration” that “marked a temporary release from normal social restraints” (4). The downside of this “release” according to the detractors of the theater and the fair, was that it brought about social disorder, confusion, and immorality. In *Bartholomew Fair*, Jonson embeds the classical satire of his comedy in the chaotic ethos of the medieval carnival, with the result that the distinction between the orderly world of everyday and the disordered chaos of the fair is leveled. In the comedy that Jonson composed two years later, *The Devil is an Ass*, Jonson again evokes the disorder associated with
medieval drama, and again conflates the medieval with the classical comic paradigm in order, this time, to critique specifically the disorder and corruption of the Jacobean court and patronage economy.

II

As the medieval carnival ethos of Bartholomew Fair has presented a problem for Jonson scholars because of its seemingly “festive” comic construction, so the dramatic construction of The Devil is an Ass around the morality-style plot of a medieval devil play has presented similar problems of interpretation. That Jonson would compose a play in the tradition of medieval moralities, complete with devils, hell-mouth, and a tempting vice figure determined to bring human souls into hell is, like its immediate predecessor, remarkable for its atypical and un-classical nature. What makes the medieval comic plot of The Devil is an Ass even more notable is the fact that Jonson had, in print, shown a measure of literary contempt for native English drama in this tradition. As Anne Barton notes in Ben Jonson, Dramatist, “In his preface to Volpone, first printed in the 1607 quarto, and allowed to stand without alteration in the Folio of 1616, Jonson had loftily dismissed plays containing ‘fooles, and devils’ as ‘antique reliques of barbarisme . . . ridiculous, and exploded follies’” (221). For Barton, The Devil is an Ass, like its predecessor of two years earlier, stands as a curious exception within Jonson’s typical comic oeuvre.

Robert Watson explains the apparent exception in Ben Jonson’s Parodic Strategy by arguing that The Devil is an Ass parodies the morality tradition as a dramatic genre “with its bogey man devils, its hokey hellmouths, and its ponderous didactic allegories” (174). He reasons that Jonson found the “morally simplistic qualities” of medieval
morality drama to be too “unrealistic” to represent contemporary society because “the
vices of a modern London audience [were] so great that an old morality-style Vice [was]
useless as a moral admonishment” (173). Herford and Simpson note the same
dramaturgical difficulty in effectively fitting the moral instruction of a medieval morality
to Jacobean culture. The Oxford editors argue that Jonson must have felt “the
incongruity of the methods and manners of the medieval devil in the complex and
sophisticated London of the seventeenth century” (2.157). Yet it is just this juxtaposition
of these “morally simplistic qualities” of the medieval drama with the ethical morass of
Jacobean London society that creates the comedy’s social satire. In The Devil is an Ass,
Jonson invokes the morally clear world of the medieval devil plays as a nostalgically
virtuous foil for the vicious London society typically represented in Jacobean city
comedy.

The juxtaposition of the simplistic medieval vice character and the highly
developed vice culture of Jacobean London is particularly foregrounded in Jonson’s
revisions of the servant figure for this comedy. In The Devil is an Ass, the medieval
devil, Pug, and the court projecter, Meercraft, are rival servants to the foolish knight
Fabian Fitzdotterel and, to an extent, rival tempters. Though their means of promoting
vice and their goals in doing so are worlds apart, they nevertheless compete for the same
space within the play’s comic plot. Each of the characters seeks to dupe Fitzdotterel for
his own gain. Pug wants to tempt his master into vices that will bring his soul to hell;
Meercraft wants to embroil him in complicated projects that will bring his estate to
Meercraft. In the comparison between Pug and Meercraft that becomes increasingly
apparent throughout the play, the medieval vice, though a real devil, is shown to be far
inferior in actually promoting vice to the Jacobean projecter. The vice represented by the antiquated medieval devil is so far surpassed by the everyday culture of the Jacobean court that it is no longer even recognized as such.

The play’s opening scene immediately conjures the world of medieval morality drama. Satan enters, probably from a trap door in the stage that had been used to simulate hell-mouth in medieval plays, raging in the manner appropriate to the entrance of medieval devils. His “Hoh, hoh, hoh, hoh, hoh, hoh, hoh” recalls Beliall’s entrance in the medieval saint play *The Conversion of St. Paul*: “Ho, ho! Beholde me, the mighte prince of the partes infernall” (412). The action of the opening scene then sets up a typically medieval dramatic situation: A minor devil, Pug, has in mind to go up to earth for the space of a month and perform a great work of vice for the kingdom of hell. Pug proposes to take with him the vice, Iniquity, a promoter of such classical sins as debauchery and violence who teaches those under his influence to “cheate . . . to cog, lye, and swagger, / And euer and anon, to be drawing forth thy dagger” (1.1.48-49). Iniquity proposes to take Pug on a journey through the most sin-ridden parts of London where his arts hold sway:

> . . . I will fetch thee a leape
> From the top of Pauls-steeple, to the Standard in Cheepe:
> We will suruay the *Suburbs*, and make forth our sallyes,
> Downe *Petticoate-lane*, and vp the *Smock-allies*,
> To *Shoreditch*, *Whitechappell*, and so to Saint *Katheernes*,
> To drinke with the *Dutch* there, and take forth their patternes:
> From thence, wee will put in at *Custome-house* key there,
And see, how the Factors and Prentizes play there,
False with their Masters; and gueld many a full packe,
To spend it in pies, at the Dagger, and Wool-sacke. (1.1.57-66)

Iniquity’s virtual tour of the underbelly of London names many contemporary dens of venality, such as “Petticoate-lane” and “Smock-allies,” and other disreputable quarters of the city that were known for housing brothels and other vicious haunts. According to Herford and Simpson, “The suburbs [that Iniquity names here] had an evil reputation, and these names keep up the innuendo” (10.222). In these places, Iniquity and Pug would likely be able to find contemporary adulterers, gamblers, whore-mongers, and drunks.

However, the venal sins that Iniquity enumerates, in this passage and through the rest of his imagined tour, are crude sins of the belly or the groin, as Jonson calls them at times, and notably passé in comparison to the sophisticated vices of Jacobean polite society. Surely, such crude vices are still practiced in Jacobean London, but, as Satan asserts a few lines later, they are no longer in fashion. Satan interrupts Iniquity’s imagined tour and reproves Pug for choosing such an antiquated vice as Iniquity:

. . . Peace, dotard,
And thou more ignorant thing, that so admir’st.
Art though the spirit thou seem’st? so poore? to choose
This [Iniquity], for a Vice, t’ advance the cause of Hell,
Now? as Vice stands this present yeere? (1.1.76-80)

That Iniquity’s ideas of vice are somewhat antiquated is also indicated by the fact that his vicious journey through the city that is so evocative of the imagined journeys of vice in late medieval interludes. His description of the city’s venality is very similar to the one
presented by Folye, the chief vice in the middle English morality play, *Mundus et Infans*, when he tempts Manhode with a similar journey of drinking and gaming their way through late medieval London taverns:

Parde, syr, we may be there on a daye.
Ye, and we shall be ryght welcome, I dare well saye,
In Estchepe for to dyne;
And than we wyll with Lombardes at passage playe,
And at the Popes Heed sweet wyne assaye;
We shall be lodged well a-fyne. (670-675)

Pug’s plans for accomplishing some great work of vice on the earth are accordingly ridiculed by his master as being hopelessly out of date and doomed to failure. Satan admonishes Pug to remember what year it is: “Six hundred and sixteene. / Had it but beene fiue hundred, though some sixty / Aboue; that’s fifty yeeres agone, and six,” his plan might be appropriate and promising, but not in 17th century Jacobean society (1.1.81-83). The brand of carnal vice proposed by Iniquity “is not that will doe, they are other things / That are recieu’d now vpon earth, for Vices; / Stranger, and newer: and chang’d euery houre” (1.1.100-102). London society has, in fact, become so sophisticated and proficient in cultivation of vice, Satan says, that hell itself cannot keep up with it in the invention of new sins: “Wee, still striue to breed, / And reare ‘hem vp new ones; but they doe not stand, / When they come there: they turne’ hem on our hands. . . . / Vnless it be a Vice of quality, / Or fashion, now, they take none from vs” (1.1.105-112). The old sins that characterized English vice in the interludes of the 1560s such as those listed by Worldly Shame in *The Nice Wanton* (1560), “Sweare[ing], lye[ing],

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steale[ing], scolde[ing], or fight[ing], carde[ing], dyce[ing], kysse[ing], clippe[ing], and so furth,” are no longer fashionable in Jacobean London (450-51). The city has moved on, Satan informs his ambitious minion, to more fashionable, more “extraordinary subtill” vices (1.1.116).

The primary subtlety of the vices that the play dramatizes, such as the corruption involved in dispensing and prosecuting projects and monopolies as well as other intrigues of court, is that they are not easily distinguished from virtues. The Jacobean culture on display in The Devil is an Ass is in stark contrast to the world of the medieval moralities, in which a sharp distinction is absolutely drawn between the cardinal virtues and deadly sins. That distinction is decidedly more blurred, so the play argues, if not leveled entirely, in contemporary English society. In a description of London culture that foreshadows Pug’s misadventures to follow, Satan details complexity to which vice had advanced in the last hundred or so years in England by warning his minion,

You are not for the manners, nor the times:
They haue their Vices, there, most like to Vertues;
You cannot know ‘hem apart, by any difference:
They weare the same clothes, eate o’ the same meate,
Sleepe I’ the selfe-same beds, ride I’ those coache’s,
Or very like, foure horses in a coach,.
As the best men and women. (1.1.120-126)

Satan predicts that Pug, naively enamored of the antiquated vices of moral interludes as he is, will not prosper in a London society in which vice and virtue are indistinguishable from each other; nonetheless, he grants him the space of a day to inhabit the body of a
recently executed criminal, take service with the first man that he meets, and work what works of iniquity he can.

The first person that Pug happens to meet provides an immediate example of the kind of London culture that Satan has been describing. Fabian Fitzdotterel, a “Squire of Norfolk,” as the *dramatis personae* lists him, is a typical London gentleman, which is to say that, like Bartholomew Cokes and the members of the gentry that Jonson castigates in *Underwood* XLIV, he is given to prodigal spending on frivolities – in his case, his wardrobe, unconcerned with cultivating virtue or learning, and values only the accumulation of more money with which to purchase his trivial material desires and further social advancement. Fitzdotterel is at least a second generation gentleman who, like the nobles in Jonson’s poem, finds his worth not in his virtues, but the “antiquity” of his name;²⁰ he takes pride in being “An ancient gentleman, of a good house, / As most are now in England” (1.2.17-18). Also like the nobles in *Underwood* XLIV – the “taylor’s blocks,” as Jonson calls them in that poem – Fitzdotterel wastes his estate keeping himself and his wife in the latest fashion.

Fitzdotterel seems to care for little else besides making an appearance. His chasing after the latest fashion is not only prodigal, but also, apparently, absurdly incompetent. He does keep his wife “Very braue” in her dress and appearance, though he keeps her largely locked away out of sight (1.4.16). He dresses himself, however, in second-hand clothes that he rents from brokers for the purpose of making brief and ostentatious public appearances, such as cutting an obtrusive figure on the stage at the theater between acts: “that’s a speciell end, why we goe thither,” he says of his prating on stage, “All that pretend, to stand for’t o’ the Stage” (1.6.35-6). Such appearances as
these are the highlights of Fitzdotterel’s social life. His virtuous rival Wittipol says of him, “He dares not misse a new Play, or a Feast, / What rate soeuer clothes be at; and thinkes / Himselfe still new, in other mens old [clothes]” (1.4.20-25).

Fitzdotterel’s foolish penchant for getting new clothes from brokers leads him to publish himself an ass in the play’s opening act when he trades fifteen minutes’ worth of uninterrupted conversation with his beautiful and virtuous wife, Frances, with Wittipol, who is in love with her, for one of his rival’s cloaks. The ridiculous foolishness of this transaction is self-evident to those who witness it. Wittipol’s friend Manly remarks, “I am past degrees of thinking. / Old Africk, and the new America, / Withall their fruite of Monsters cannot shew / So iust a prodigie. . . . I confesse / His Vices are the most extremities / I euer knew in nature” (1.5.7-16). After his poor wife has endured the embarrassing incident, she chides him for the wreckage he makes of his reputation, and, by implication, hers: “Are you not enough / The talke, of feasts, and meetings, but you’ll still / Make argument for fresh?” (1.6.8-10). Fitzdotterel, however, is blissfully unself-aware. He reproves his wife for chiding him, arguing that he has made quite a bargain in getting a cloak in return for what he perceives as nothing. “Wherefore, wife,” he gloats, “Let them that list, laugh still, rather than weepe / For me; Heere is a cloake cost fifty pound, wife, / Which I can sell for thirty, when I ha’ seene / All London in’t, and London has seene mee” (1.6.26-30). Like many upper classmen of his generation, Fitzdotterel willingly neglects the maintenance of his reputation for the sake of the better maintaining his wardrobe. The lack of self-awareness is typical of Fitzdotterel’s character. Though he seems clearly to have garnered the reputation of a fool throughout the city, he
nonetheless thinks that he is considered an upstanding member of the gentry. Wittipol describes his wondrous ignorance as follows:

A wit he has, of that strange credit with him,
‘Gainst all mankinde; as it doth make him doe
Just what it list: it rauishes him forth,
Whither it please, to an assembly’or place,
And would conclude him ruin’d, should hee scape
One publike meeting, out of the believe
He has of his owne great, and catholike strengths,
In arguing, and discourse. (1.4.27-36)

Fitzdotterel’s inconstant flitting about the London public scene, “ravished forth” by his foolish wit, is reminiscent of Cokes’s wandering about the fair in whatever direction his humor takes him. In many ways, Fitzdotterel is really an older version of Cokes. Like Cokes, his foolishness is inherent in his very name: “dotterel” and “cokes” were both contemporary synonyms for “fool.” As Cokes was to marry the much more wise and virtuous Grace Wellborn and thereby assume control of her estate, so Fitzdotterel has come to control the estate of his wiser and more virtuous wife. Moreover, Fitzdotterel’s foolish prodigality threatens to waste his wife’s estate, as Cokes undoubtedly would have wasted Grace Wellborn’s were he to successfully consummate his marriage. Late in the play, Frances confides in Wittipol regarding the grave oppression of her inequitable match:

. . . I am a woman,

That cannot speake more wretchednesse of my selfe,
Then you can read; match’d to a masse of folly;

That euery day makes haste to his owne ruine;

The wealthy portion, that I brought him, spent;

And (through my friends neglect) no ioynture made me.  (4.6.18-23)

Like Grace, Frances finds herself exploited by Jacobean patriarchal policies of estate inheritance – namely wardship and jointure policies – that sought to bring money into the Crown’s coffers at the expense of women of means. Grace’s estate is in danger of falling into the hands of the prodigally spending Cokes, and Frances’s estate is, until Wittipol dupes him into signing a deed of enfeofment, in the incapable hands of Fitzdotterel.

Cokes’s prodigality is evidenced by his childishly frittering away his estate on the worthless baubles of the fair. While Fitzdotterel’s spending habits may not be as childish as Cokes’s, they are no less foolish and absurd. Fashioning himself as a sort of Dr. Faustus, Fitzdotterel has wasted much of his estate – that which is not spent hiring clothing – on hiring conjurers to raise him a devil, which he thinks will make him rich.

Wittipol reports that Fitzdotterel wants to raise a devil

\[ \ldots \text{for hidden treasure,} \]

\[ \text{Hee hopes to finde: and has propos’d himself} \]

\[ \text{So infinite a Masse, as to recouer,} \]

\[ \text{He cares not what he parts with, of the present} \]

\[ \text{To his men of Art, who are the race, may coyne him.} \quad (1.5.17-21) \]

The vice at the root of Fitzdotterel’s pursuit of a conjurer, as Wittipol goes on to note, is the vice that Jonson seems to consistently argue is most characteristic of the aspiring
English gentry, that is, avarice: “Promise gold-mountaines, and the couetous / Are still the most prodigall” (1.5.22-23). Fitzdotterel’s greed and foolishness are so all encompassing that he is entirely willing to part with his virtue and reputation in order to get himself a devil. He will even part with his wife. In his opening soliliquoy, he says,

Would I might see the Diuell. I would giue
A hundred o’ these pictures, so to see him
Once out of picture. May I proue a cuckold,
(And that’s the one maine mortall thing I feare). . . . (1.2.10-13)

Taken all together, Fitzdotterel is a sort of culmination of the Jonsonian unworthy, foolish gentleman gull. In his character are combined the foolishness of Sogliardo, the greed and jealousy of Corvino, and the affected fashion-chasing and court-posing of Fastidious Briske. Fitzdotterel is the ultimate critique of the way that the Jacobean commercialization of patronage results in a disreputable and incapable gentry. Corruption has advanced so far in his character, that rather than falling victim to being tempted with riches by the devil, he actively seeks the devil out. If *The Devil is an Ass* is a sort of Jacobean morality play, then Fitzdotterel is a perverse sort of every-gentleman. That is to say that like Everyman in his eponymous medieval morality, in this play, Fitzdotterel is revealed to spend the bulk of his life in the pursuit of the worldly vices most typical to his station and to his time as a typical Jacobean gentleman.

The difference between Fitzdotterel and the Everyman type characters of the morality plays, though, is that Fitzdotterel has no fear of or aversion to vice. Rather, like the perverse parody of the Everyman character that Marlowe dramatized in *Dr. Faustus*, he actively searches out vice by attempting to raise a devil to satisfy his greed.
Fitzdotterel is typical of the city environment Satan has described where virtue is indistinguishable from vice. Money is a virtue in Jacobean London; therefore it follows that greed is a virtue, and so such obvious evils as devilry become sought after as virtuous.

Given this environment, it would seem easy for Pug to dupe Fitzdotterel into committing new heights of sins. When Pug meets him, in fact, he is in the midst of a soliloquy expressing his earnest desire to meet the devil, yet Pug underestimates Fitzdotterel’s natural propensity towards vice, and so he misses the chance to establish himself in a Mephistopheles-like position whereby he might gain control over his earthly master. Instead of introducing himself as the devil that Fitzdotterel has been looking for, Pug claims to be a “Gentleman, / A younger brother; but in some disgrace,” apparently playing to Fitzdotterel’s generosity (1.3.2-3). Fitzdotterel, though, has neither generosity, nor grace, and even when Pug offers to work for no wages, he refuses, indicating that the devil has missed his chance:

_FIT. . . . ‘Pr’y thee, friend, forbeare mee, And thou hadst beene a Diuell, I should say Somewhat more to thee. Thou dost hinder now, My meditations. PVG. Sir, I am a Diuell._

_FIT. How! PVG. A true Diuell, Sr. FIT. Nay, now, you ly: Vnder your fauour, friend, for, I’lI not quarrell. I look’d o’ your feet, afore, you cannot cozen mee, Your shoo’s not clouen, Sir, you are whole hoof’d. (1.3.22-29)
As this dialogue shows, Pug vastly underestimates Fitzdotterel’s vicious nature, but he overestimates his intelligence. He attempts to reason that the childish belief in the cloven hoof is a “popular error, deceiues many,” but Fitzdotterel stands firm in his superstitious conviction (1.3.30). Ironically, his natural inclination to vice and his stupidity would prevent him from taking in the devil he has been seeking, but he is just capricious enough to take Pug on as a servant because he like his name, which Pug claims to be “Diuell” (1.3.32).

As the plot progresses, Pug continues to be unable to navigate the complex world of vice in Jacobean London. Whereas he mistakes Fitzdotterel for being too sophisticated, however, he fails with most other characters because he, though an embodiment of vice itself, is not subtle enough in his practice of iniquity to play the game of Jacobean vice. He shows his ineptitude in the first act of wickedness that he attempts to prosecute. When he learns of the potential for adultery between Wittipol and Mrs. Fitzdotterel, Pug latches onto it as an opportunity to promote the cause of vice. He states,

. . . My first Act, now,

Shall be, to make this Master of mine cuckold:

The primitiue worke of darknesse, I will practice!

I will deserue so well of my faire Mistresse,

By my discoueries, first; my counsels after;

And keeping counsel, after that: as who,

So euer, is one, I’le be another, sure,

I’ll ha’ my share. Most delicate damn’d flesh!

Shee will be! (2.2.12-20)
Pug is not sophisticated enough, however, to aid the work of adultery in Jacobean London. Moreover, as the above speech demonstrates, he is too distracted by his own brutish carnality, a trait that the Jacobean Londoners have learned to refine and control. When Pug bears a message to his mistress requesting a secret meeting from the young gallant Wittipol, he is so forward and obsequious in his pandering that his mistress assumes he must be spying for her husband. When Wittipol’s messenger arrives to receive an answer from Frances to his morning’s suit, Pug carries his message to his mistress and crudely insinuates his complicity in any plot she may wish to undertake. He announces the messenger, saying,

Mistresse, it is, but first, let me assure
The excellence, of Mistresses, I am,
Although my Master’s man, my Mistresse slaue,
The seruant of her secrets, and sweete turnes,
And know, what fitly will conduce to either. (2.2.34-38)

He is so blunt in his offering to pander that Mrs. Fitzdotterel suspects he must be spying for her husband. “O!” she says to herself, once Pug has departed with her answer, “you’ll anon proue his hyr’d man, I feare, / What has he giu’n you for this message?” (2.2.46-7). Because of her suspicions, she refuses Pug’s offer and appears, to him, to refuse Wittipol’s suit, though her refusal to his message surreptitiously names a safe place for a rendezvous. The simple Pug fails to catch the vice latently at work in his mistress’s reply. He rather redoubles his efforts at gaining her trust and maligning Fitzdotterel, and is, again, so blunt in his vicious insinuation that Mrs. Fitzdotterel finally exposes him to her husband, thinking that she is outing his jealous plot, which earns the hapless Pug a
beating from the temperamental Fitzdotterel. The implicit social critique in Pug’s botched adultery plot is of the pervasiveness of the sophisticated culture of vice in Jacobean London. Even relatively virtuous members of that society, like Mrs. Fitzdotterel, are more versed in the sophisticated ways of vice than a devil of hell itself.

If Pug is outclassed in the ways of vice by the sheltered and virtuous Mrs. Fitzdotterel, who is only tempted to Wittipol’s suit because of the likeness of their virtuous natures and her husband’s monstrous idiocy and vice, then he is completely at a loss when he comes to deal with the court ladies, Eitherside and Tailbush, at the latter’s house later in the play. These ladies are accomplished in the subtle and vicious ways of the Jacobean court, including the pursuit of haute fashion, the employment of cosmetics and other methods of beautification – a practice which Jonson’s comedies generally associate with deception and vice – and, in particular, sophisticated adulteries. The court ladies in *The Devil is an Ass* are experts in the adulterous practices that Knockem had recommended in *Bartholomew Fair* to Alice Overdo and Win Littlewit because they are “ladylike.” The conversation between Eitherside and Tailbush at Tailbush’s regarding their adulterous social habits illustrates their adeptness in adulteries:

EIT. We [ladies] may haue our dozen of visiters, at once, Make loue to ’vs. TAY. And before our husbands. EIT. Husband? As I am honest, Tayle-bush, I doe thinke If no body should loue mee, but my poore husband, I should e’en hang my selfe. (4.4.94-98)

Eitherside’s and Tailbush’s conversations about adultery as if it were inherent to polite society make Frances Fitzdotterel’s planned tryst with Wittipol seem shamefacedly coy.
While visiting her house, Poor Pug is subjected to an interview by Lady Tailbush’s company of court socialites on the qualities of a good gentleman usher. The comic irony of Pug’s lack of facility in answering these questions is that most of those duties tend towards being an accessory to his lady’s vices: maintaining her vanity, indulging her interest in astrology, and, principally, abetting secret adulterous relationships. Here again, the sophistication of vice in Jacobean London is beyond Pug’s ability to master, and he fails his interview miserably. The courtly conversation at Tailbush’s leaves him baffled. He remarks afterwards, “You talke of a Vniversity! why, Hell is / A Grammar-schoole to this” (4.4.170-171), and is left to conclude, “There is no hell / To a Lady of Fashion. All your tortures there / Are pastimes to it. ‘T would be a refreshing / For me, to be I’ the fire againe, from hence” (5.2.14-17). In the face of the intricate workings of vice in the Jacobean court, where it is often disguised as virtue, Pug’s bumbling simplicity renders him a completely inept tempter.

The failures and bumbling nature of vice characters is actually typical of the morality tradition, as evidenced, for example, by the slapstick foibles of Nought, New-Guise, and Nowadays in the popular medieval morality, Mankind. What is unique about Jonson’s revision of the character in this play, though, is that Pug fails not because of the final triumph of the virtue of the earthly characters or the intervention of a divine Mercy (Mankind) or a allegorized Conscience (Mundus et Infans) but because the city’s moral climate is one where vice and virtue have become so indistinguishable that even an incarnate vice cannot sort them out.

Jonson’s morality play is not without its successful vice characters, however. Meercraft, a “projecter,” is a character much more skilled in the cultivation of the modern
fashionable vices of projecting, procuring monopolies and patents (or at least convincing the gullible that he can procure them), and exploiting the Jacobean bureaucracy for financial gain. Essentially, Meercraft is little more than a con man, cheating his victims by deluding them with hopes of fortunes to be made by his outrageous projects, but his ability to navigate the muddied moral waters of the Jacobean city make him succeed in the promotion of his vicious schemes where Pug fails.

Meercraft’s superiority as a vice character is shown in his first appearance in the play as he is able to place himself into Fitzdotterel’s trust and service in exactly the way that Pug cannot. Fitzdotterel’s agent, Ingine, presents Meercraft in place of the conjurers that Fitzdotterel has been employing to raise a devil that will make him rich. Ingine introduces Meercraft, not as a conjurer, but a “Proiector” (1.7.5), “one Sir, that proiects / Wayes to enrich men, or to make ‘hem great, / By suites, by marriages, by vndertakings: / According as he sees they humour it” (1.7.10-13). Fitzdotterel, in his typically foolish manner, at first hangs on to his hope of having a devil raised to find him hidden treasure. He asks Ingine hopefully, “Can hee not coniure at all?” (1.7.14). As Meercraft asserts upon his first entrance, though, a Jacobean projector is more adept than any conjurer at procuring riches out of nothing:

Sir, money’s a whore, a bawd, a drudge;
Fit to runne out on errands: Let her goe.
Via pecunia! when she’s runne and gone,
And fled and dead; then will I fetch her, againe,
With Aqua-vitae, out of an old Hogs-head! (2.1.1-5)
Meercraft’s confident claims of being able to command money appeal to the root of Fitzdotterel’s vice, which is, of course, his greed. In terms of what he can offer, he compares favorably with a devil, and as the play goes on to imply, his machinations and schemes are even more amenable to the cause of vice.

Meercraft proposes a project for Fitzdotterel’s undertaking that will make him absurdly rich: the draining of the English fens. The project, Meercraft assures him, “will arise / To eyghteene millions, seuen the first yeere: / I haue computed all, and made my suruay / Vnto an acre” (2.1.50-53). Meercraft convinces Fitzdotterel that he will be so rich that he can rise to any height on the social hierarchy that he wishes, even to the rank of Duke (2.1.117). The promise of dukedom is an especially sharp critique of the selling of offices that characterized Jacobean patronage, for as the language of Meercraft’s very offer implies, the office of Duke, second only in power to the throne, was hardly bestowed in England at all, let alone sold. Whereas Fitzdotterel is not taken in by Pug’s offers to be his diabolical servant, even though he is looking for a devil, he swallows Meercraft’s more earthly machinations to make him rich hook, line, and sinker. Herford and Simpson note the ways in which Meercraft represents a more fashionable and sophisticated brand of Jacobean vice that replaces the antiquated vice represented by Pug: “Meercraft, the principal agent in exploiting [Fitzdotterel’s] credulity, is the true Mephistophiles of the piece – a cunning human devil who easily supplants the stupid authentic one, and provides at least the illusory prospect of treasure which the other is helpless even to suggest” (2.162).

What is perhaps most pernicious about Meercraft’s vice of projecting and monopoly hunting is that it disguises itself as civic virtue. He convinces Fitzdotterel that
he will be doing England a great boon in undertaking the recovery of the drowned lands. He flatters Lady Tailbush that the project he is undertaking for her, obtaining a monopoly on a special kind of cosmetic, will gain her the thanks of all of the members of her sex. In his explanation of how they will fund the drowned-lands project to Fitzdotterel, however, Meercraft betrays that the chief interest of the project is not the good of the commonwealth, but the profit for his client: “Hee shall not draw / A string of’s purse. I’ll driue his patent for him. / We’ll take in Cittizens, Commoners, and Aldermen, / To beare the charge, and blow ‘hem off againe, / Like so many dead flyes, when ’tis carryed” (2.1.40-44). The lack of concern for the commoners they will fleece notwithstanding, Meercraft’s claims for the civic good that his projects produce are not entirely void of any historical validity. Projects and monopolies were introduced into English policy as early as the reign of Henry VIII in order to encourage diversification of the English economy (Peck 3). In theory, they were good for the country, reducing dependence on foreign-manufactured imports and stimulating economic growth, but corruption within the patronage system that granted monopolies created opportunities for political graft, bribery, and price-gouging. The rampant abuse of the project and monopoly system is evidenced by the fact that both Elizabeth and James were forced to revoke the majority of outstanding monopoly grants by the parliaments of 1601 and 1621, respectively.

As Peck’s study notes in several places, one of the most repeated criticisms of the system of granting patents for projects and monopolies in Jacobean England was that the patents were granted in return for bribes. This bribery, it was alleged, constituted a fair measure of the “alternative taxation” by which James and his aristocracy were able to
finance their lavish lifestyles (Marcus 49). As a typical projecter, Meercraft obtains the grants for his clients through the means of bribery. While attempting to sell Fitzdotterel on the project of draining the fens, he dispatches his servant, Traines, to transfer bribe money to Justice Eitherside for the securing of Tailbush’s patent:

Commend my service to my Lady Tail-bush.
Tell her I am come from Court this morning; say,
I’haue got our bus’ness mou’d, and well: Intreat her,
That shee giue you the four-score Angels, and see ’hem
Dispos’d of to my Councel, Sir Poul Eytherside. (2.1.135-39)

His assertion of the necessity of “gifts” sent to the proper places in order to have his clients’ projects expedited is his chief means of fleecing them of their money, as he apparently does Tailbush and attempts to do to Fitzdotterel. He nearly carries out a similar scheme of stealing an intended bribe when he, for a time, pockets the ring that he tells Fitzdotterel must be given to the “Spanish Lady” to persuade her to educate his wife in the ways of the aristocracy (3.6). Meercraft’s actions in undertaking the prosecution of projects for Fitzdotterel and Tailbush vividly illustrate the opportunity for vice and corruption that is created by the subterranean exchange of money that was necessary to obtain the proper patents for projects and monopolies in Jacobean London.

The outrageous nature of the projects that Meercraft proposes for Fitzdotterel also shows the absurd heights to which projects and monopolies had advanced themselves, as they increasingly became little more than excuses for extortion of bribes in return for the right to price-gouge. In offering his services to Fitzdotterel, Meercraft unveils plans to make gloves out of dog skins, to obtain a patent for a special kind of bottle-ale, and to
make wine from raisins (2.1.65-105). The description of the dog skin gloves is particularly ridiculous. Meercraft says, “Yes, / But, by my way of dressing, you must know, Sir, / And med’cing the leather, to a height / Of improu’d ware, like your Borachio / Of Spaine, Sir, I can fetch nine thousand for’t” (2.1.68-72). Both the nature of the projects and the prices that he attaches to them are self-evidently absurd. Nonetheless, they are not so much more far-fetched than actual projects that were proposed and granted during these years in England. Peck catalogs a representative sampling of the vast array of proposals for patents that were put forth in the years between 1610 and 1620, ranging from proposals for the patenting of “industrial processes. . . . agricultural products and techniques. . . . [and] rights of licensing, to regulate products and behavior” (139-140). Just a few examples from Peck’s laundry list of absurdities are patent requests for “the making of strong waters and vinegar . . . the erection of snow-houses and the right to sell snow and ice preserved in them . . . perpetual motion engines. . . . the curing of rotten sheep; taming and breeding wild fowls. . . . an office to register and examine bankrupts throughout England and Wales . . . [and] the enforcement of the assize of bread” (139-40). Some of Peck’s examples of projects proposed and patents granted are, like Meercraft’s proposals, extravagant by their very nature. Others are simply absurd in that they establish a provision for ridiculously excessive government regulation. All the proposals, however, as Meercraft’s practices illustrate, are opportunities for corruption and the promulgation of vice.

The Devil is an Ass satirizes the corruption that Meercraft represents as having reached absurd levels in London culture. English society is depicted in the play as being composed of the criminal extortion of projecters like Meercraft; a gullible, foolish and
prodigal but rich gentry, as represented by Fitzdotterel; sexually wanton and appearance-obsessed court ladies like Tailbush and Eitherside; and corruptible and incompetent common law judges like Sir Paul Eitherside. In this culture of sophisticated iniquity, Meercraft, the modern day earthly vice, is completely at home, whereas Pug, the actual embodiment of demonic vice, is flustered and confused. In short, his abilities in the cultivation of vice are surpassed by Jacobean London.

In the scene following Meercraft’s project proposals to Fitzdotterel, Pug begins to realize that he is outclassed and admits the veracity of Satan’s charge that he wouldn’t need to bring any vices along with him from hell:

. . . Bring

A Vice from thence? That had bin such a subtilty,

As to bring broad-clothes hither: or transport

Fresh oranges into Spaine. I finde it, now;

My Chiefe was i’ the right. Can any feind

Boast of a better Vice, then here by nature,

And art, th’are owners of? Hell ne’r owne mee,

But I am taken! the fine tract of it

Pulls me along! To heare men such professors

Growne in our subtest Sciences! (2.2.3-12)

The devil continually finds in this play that he is outdone at his own sport by the society he presumes to tempt. He is made to appear “an ass” by being so surpassed at his own game.
Pug’s final humiliation occurs when he is charged with theft by Tailbush’s gentleman usher, Ambler, from whom he has stolen his clothes earlier in the day. He appeals to Fitzdotterel, who is at this time plotting with Meercraft for the recovery of his estate, which Wittipol has tricked him into signing over to his friend Manly by deed of enfeoffment. Wittipol, of course, undertakes this scheme to dupe Fitzdotterel in order to eventually put his estate under the control of Mrs. Fitzdotterel, and thereby to ensure that her husband’s prodigality and gullibility will not bankrupt her. Meercraft’s plan to regain control of the estate is for Fitzdotterel to feign demon possession, invalidating the deed of enfeoffment. Pug offers genuine demonic help in this plot, offering to “so help . . . your possession, as my selfe were in you,” if Fitzdotterel will bail him out, but as at the play’s opening, Fitzdotterel refuses to acknowledge his demonic servant for a devil, calling him an “infernal counterfeit wretch” (5.5.21-29). Meercraft endorses Fitzdotterel’s sending him away, implicitly asserting his own superiority as a vice by saying, “Why, if he were the Diuel, we sha’ not need him” (5.5.38). Meercraft thus directly triumphs over hell itself in the prosecution of vice.

And so Pug is taken back to Newgate prison and sentenced to be executed. It is only the grace of the Devil, so to speak, that saves Pug from hanging, when Satan emerges from hell-mouth to bring him back to hell before his execution. Satan expresses his dispeasure, telling Pug,

But that I would not such a damn’d dishonour
Sticke on our state, as that the diuell were hang’d;
And could not saue a body, that he tooke
From Tyborne, but it must come thither againe:
You should e’en ride. (5.6.69-73)

Ironically, it is this final intrusion of the supernatural hell of the morality drama into the world of city comedy that indirectly provides for the final defeat of the worldly vice plot of Meercraft. When the jailors give their report of Pug’s disappearance to the justice, Sir Paul Eitherside – whose very name bespeaks his corruptibility as a judge, they find him presiding over Fitzdotterel’s demon possession. When they report that the prisoner was the same man who had been hanged that morning and the smell of Brimstone in the cell, their conclusion is finally to recognize that Pug must have been a devil. The realization that he has actually spent the day in the company a devil startles Fitzdotterel, and he repents, dropping his feigned demon possession and effectively thwarting the vicious schemes of Meercraft. The intrusion of hell into modern society, in this case, actually aids the cause of virtue rather than vice, and the resultant, comically ironic indictment of Jacobean society is clear: it has so far surpassed hell itself in the practice of vice, that the very embodiment of vice comes across as virtuous in relation to it. As the disordered ethos of the medieval carnival proves an indictment of the disorder of Jacobean city culture when juxtaposed to it in Bartholomew Fair, so the relatively simple moral ethos of medieval drama, where vice and virtue are clearly defined, is an indictment of the muddied morals of Jacobean society when held up next to the city’s culture in The Devil is an Ass.

III

The commercialization of patronage and the overvaluation of money in Jacobean England had resulted in a gentry that, by the middle years of James’s reign, were
 unprecedentedly given to cultivating habits of luxurious material consumption and earning more money by whatever means were most expedient in order to finance their lifestyles. Because the accumulation of money from the sale of office and perquisites became necessary in order to finance these livings, wealth came increasingly to replace virtue as the basis upon which social advancement was conferred. Moreover, as the English upper classes became less interested in cultivating the virtues of statesmanship, learning, and martial valor that might have provided a moral and meritorious center around which society could order itself, challenges to traditional authorities from upstart, presumptuous, and no more meritorious elements of society such as seditious Puritans and overweening judges further disordered an already destabilized culture.

This, at least, is the picture that Jonson paints of the English society in his satiric poetry and drama of the middle Jacobean period. In the comedies, *Bartholomew Fair* and *The Devil is an Ass* particularly, Jonson emphasizes this satiric critique by juxtaposing his typical neoclassical comic plot – a plot typically centered around a clever servant who plays upon the representative social follies of the comic dupes – with the comic ethoi of the holiday carnival and the medieval morality play. In each case, the juxtaposition emphasizes the satire of the social disorder that Jonson attributes to Jacobean London at this time.

When these comedies are seen in this light, it appears that rather than throwing his traditional moral stridency to the wind, as some critics have argued Jonson does, particularly in *Bartholomew Fair*, Jonson actually intensifies his typical moral critique; Jacobean London is satirized as more prone than ever to vice. If the moral satire is heightened, though, the sense of judgment at the comedies’ ends is gentler. In each of
these plays, the dupes repent, to some extent, and society is restored. The realization that all have sinned leaves less room for a strident enforcement of moral justice in the plays’ denouements. There is a sense of resignation, as expressed in Wasp’s resolution, “He that will correct another, must want fault in himself” (5.4.100). In Jonson’s late, Carolingian comedies, his “dotages,” they are famously called, the paradoxical tone of moral instruction combined with gracious forgiveness of sin is still more apparent.

1 The Oxford editors, Herford and Simpson, date the composition of the poem around 1625, but note that “the reference in lines 24-7 to the City not sparing powder or paper to train the company ‘these ten yeares day’ points it back to 1615-16” and the establishment of the citizen militia’s yearly practice of exercising “Armes in the Artillerie Garden” (11.82). They also link it to another Underwood poem, XV, which, in urging a friend to flee the vice of the city and exercise his virtues in the military theater, carries much the same moral satire. Thus, the poem describes a degeneration of the martial and civic virtues in younger members of the Jacobean nobility during a period of national peace, beginning from the mid-1610s, a period contemporary to the composition of Bartholomew Fair and The Devil is an Ass, the plays under discussion in this chapter.

2 “Virtue” as Jonson uses it in this poem and throughout his comedies signifies a broader set of character traits than simply the moral restraint the term implies today. In Jonson’s texts, the term seems to include martial competency, wisdom, knowledge, and civic responsibility, as well as a moral restraint and control of material desires.

3 Of course, mention of the citizen militia raises the issue of contemporary discussion between James and Parliament about the maintenance of a standing army. This issue, in itself, is worthy of extended historical discussion, but it is outside the scope of my work here. I only wish to invoke this poem’s lament of the nobility’s abdication of military responsibility as a part of the general critique the poem makes about the degeneration of English nobility.

4 The previous chapter contains more details on the marked increase in both the favors of patronage itself and in the marketing of those favors in the early years of James’s reign. This chapter, below, presents details of how the commercialization, and the corruption that accompanied it, continued to increase in the middle years of Jacobean rule.

5 Sheila Walsh has noted this heraldic fraud in her work on the degeneration of Jacobean heraldry as a context for The New Inn. Her work is discussed in more detail in Chapter 4, page 38.

6 Linda Levy Peck’s Court Patronage and Corruption in Early Stuart England contains many specific cases of the schemes of marketing patronage whereby James and his aristocracy bolstered their finances by selling off monopolies, patents for extravagant projects, and various offices. The marketing of offices is also prominently discussed in Lawrence Stone’s The Crisis of the Aristocracy.

7 McDowell is here quoting from Marcus’s The Politics of Mirth (4-5).

8 Alvin Kernan’s discussion of the Elizabethan satirist in The Cankered Muse contains some useful commentary on the English medieval and Renaissance satirists’ tendency to push their victims to greater levels of vice in order to make that vice more clearly visible, and visible as vice. Kernan writes of the satirist,

   Trapped by his need for making sin appear hideous he seems always to be seeking out and thoroughly enjoying the kind of filth which he claims to be attacking. And at the same time that he opens himself to the charge of being a literary Peeping Tom, he also makes it possible to charge him with sensationalism, for the more effectively he builds up catalogues of human vice, the more it will appear that he is merely purveying salacious material to satisfy the meaner appetites of his audience. (25)
Stallybrass and White note the tradition of discourse in Europe associating the fair with immorality and disorder, writing, “We now have evidence over a long historical period of the discursive construction of the fair as the antithesis of order, civility and decorum. The medieval homilist listed the fair amongst a catalogue of iniquities” (31-32). The particular diatribes against the fair from puritan elements of Jacobean society have been mentioned in selections from Leah Marcus’s work above and will be discussed in further detail below.

Of course, not all who were classified as Puritans would have opposed the fair. Leah Marcus’s study, for instance notes that there were some Puritans with a monetary interest in fair’s cloth market (see below). Many of the more conservative and vocal – the two seemed to go together – strains of Puritanism, such as that exemplified by Zeal of the Land Busy, would have definitely have declared the evils of the fair, as Busy does in the play.

This question is also raised in Shannon Miller’s discussion of the play in “Consuming Mothers/Consuming Merchants: The Carnivalesque Economy of Jacobean City Comedy” (88). Miller states the question in the same terms as Marcus – in fact, she quotes her.

In setting the parameters for his structural analysis of Jonson’s play, Potter writes, “In his definition of Aristophanes’ comedy, Francis Cornford delineates four events which occur in the majority of the plays and which he maintains are the essential, ritual-based elements of Old Comedy: the parabasis, the feast and sacrifice, the agon, and the exodus. Each of these events is clearly present in Bartholomew Fair” (291).

Classical and the carnivalesque, though perhaps not necessarily oppositional, tend to be opposed to each other in discussions of this play that read it as the latter, probably as a result of Bakhtin’s setting the “grotesque” body of the carnival over against the classical body of official culture. Peter Stallybrass defines the Bakhtinian classical body as “a strictly completed, finished product isolated, alone, fenced off from all other bodies” (129).

Even Stallybrass and White, though, note that it was Jonson’s practice to attempt just such a containment. They note that “the notion of ‘authorship’ to which Jonson dedicated his poetic career was in every way in contradiction to Saturnalia, the grotesque, even to the theatre itself” (67). The overflow of carnival elements that “contaminate” Jonson’s text occurs in spite of the author’s attempts to contain them.

A more complete discussion of the debate which encompasses James’s licensed monopoly of the theaters, his support of other sports such as bear-baiting and his general encouragement of festivals, and the moral criticisms of his opponents can be found in the introductory chapter to Marcus’s Politics and Mirth.

Paul writes to the Romans concerning whether eating meat that has been offered to idols, an ancient practice of Roman pagans, constitutes idolatrous participation in pagan worship. He says, “Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations. For one believeth that he may eat all things: another, who is weak, eateth herbs. Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth: for God hath received him” (Rom. 14:1-3, KJV). Here and elsewhere when Paul discusses this subject, his point is that since idols are not, in fact gods, that there is no harm in eating meat, though out of consideration for those converted from pagan religions, the stronger Christians should not flaunt their liberty by participating in feasting, which to the “weak” is still associated with paganism. Paul’s overriding concern is that the church members, strong and weak, abide in peace without disputing – a point which is obviously completely lost on Busy.

Isaiah 53:7 (KJV), a passage the Christian church has historically interpreted as a prophecy of Christ’s suffering, reads, “He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.”

Here again, Shannon Miller’s essay, “Consuming Mothers/Consuming Merchants: The Carnivalesque Economy of Jacobean City Comedy” is helpful in its account of the metaphor of “the commodified woman” in Jacobean comedy (86).

The similarities between Sogliardo and Cokes are noted above.

The “antiquity” of Fitzdotterel’s name may have been intended as an ironic jest. As Lawrence Stone points out in The Crisis of the Aristocracy, there were quite a number of forged genealogies in early seventeenth century England (16).

A rather extensive discussion of Jacobean jointure law is contained in “Contract and Property Law in The Devil is an Ass” by Barbara Irene Kreps.

In the wooing scene of Act I, where Wittipol speaks for Frances because her husband has bound her to silence as part of the contract, the young gallant accurately describes the ill-match of Mr. and Mrs. Fitzdotterel as follows:
I haue a husband, and a two-legg’d done,
But such a moon-ling, as no wit of man
Or roses can redeeme from being an Asse.
H’is growne, too much, the story of mens mouthes,
To scape his lading: should I make’t my study,
And lay all wayes, yea, call mankind to helpe,
To take his burden off, why, this one act
Of his, to let his wife out to be courted,
And, at a price, proclaimes his asinine nature
So lowd, as I am weary of my title to him. (1.6.157-66)

A classic and extended example of Jonson’s critique of the cosmetic practices of Jacobean ladies is the conversation between Truewit and Clerimont in the opening scene of Epicene.

Meercraft says, “But, I could shew you / Such a necessity in’t, as you must be / But what you please: against the recieu’d heresie, / That England beares no Dukes” (2.1.114-17). At the time of this play, there had not been a non-royal duke in England since Norfolk was executed in 1572. Nor would any non-royal be raised to the level of duke until Buckingham in 1623 (Smith 268).

Paul Eitherside’s incompetence as a judge is shown particularly in the play’s final act when he mistakes Fitzdotterel’s ridiculous feigning of demon possession for the real thing, and before Fitzdotterel’s repentance, is going to judge in his favor regarding the accusation of his wife for witchcraft and the invalidation of his deed of enfeoffment. Robert C. Evans argues that the portrayal of Eitherside is a parody of Sir Edward Coke, while Julie Sanders contends that he is closer to Lord Chief Justice Popham.
Meritorious Servants: Virtuous Servants Rewarded

At the outset of his article, “The Prison-House of the Canon: Allegorical Form and Posterity in Ben Jonson’s The Staple of News,” Douglas M. Lanier states explicitly a primary challenge that much Jonson criticism faces in undertaking analysis of the poet’s Caroline plays: “Two facts of literary history have set the course for the study of Ben Jonson’s late plays. The first, John Dryden’s label ‘the dotages’ has encouraged critics to apologize for or attempt to rehabilitate the late plays, in effect to speculate as to just how much blood got to Ben’s brain in the final decades of his life” (253). The second fact, Lanier argues, is the publication of the 1616 Workes, which, even in the poet’s lifetime, created a “measure by which all Jonson’s subsequent stagework was [unfairly] to be judged” (254).

The effect of the 1616 folio on the reception of Jonson’s later plays and the composition of The Staple of News is the focus of Lanier’s thought provoking analysis, but the first of these events, Dryden’s label of “dotages,” seems to have had the most enduring effect on criticism of Jonson’s Caroline comedies, with the result that many analyses of the late plays devote much of their critical task to recuperating the plays’ reputations. Larry S. Champion’s 1968 analysis of The Magnetic Lady is one example of the type of apology that Lanier describes. Champion argues that this very late humors comedy, which “again expos[es] hypocrisy and pretension, and again depict[s] the antithesis between intellect and the follies of fashion, between the scholar poet and the poetaster, and between the genuine aristocrat and the fops and dandies of court,” belongs among Jonson’s earlier humors plays as an embodiment of “the higher aims of satiric comedy” (114, 104). According to Champion, The Magnetic Lady contains, especially
within its “intercalary materials[,] . . . a virtual exegesis on comedy,” (104). Devra Rowland Kifer, in a similarly apologetic analysis, constructs a defense of *The Staple of News* by turning what critics since Dryden have considered a weakness of the play into a strength. In her reading, the “absence of unity among the disparate elements of satire, morality, and allegory” signals a bold new dramatic experiment in richly inclusive festive comedy, a “topical satire, morality-allegory, satirical-romantic festive comedy” as she calls it, channeling Polonius with her tongue only slightly in her cheek (329). The power of Dryden’s comment is so potent that even very contemporary criticism, such as Julie Sanders’s 2003 article, “*The New Inn* and *The Magnetic Lady*: Jonson’s Dramaturgy in the Caroline Context,” which is much more concerned with Jonson’s use of offstage space and its relation to the Caroline political climate than it is with the relative quality of these late comedies, still feels the need to explicitly dismiss the label of “dotages” at the outset before moving on to her “historicized reading” (51).

Lanier argues that the late plays are misjudged by Dryden and his critical followers because they are read in light of Jonson’s earlier comedies, the ones of the 1616 folio. He contends that in the later plays – or at least in *The Staple of News* – Jonson is making a conscious effort to abstract his comic moral satire from the particular vices of immediately contemporary society,¹ and thus “to emphasize not the topical manifestations of vices (the humors) that plague his age, the specific ways in which individuals abuse money or language, but rather the universal themes of the Jonsonian canon itself, the abuse of money and language *per se*” [emphasis added] (255). According to Lanier, Jonson undertakes the move to allegory in order to prevent his audience from identifying his comedies too closely with specific contemporary culture
and events and therefore dooming his work to pass away with the cultural habits with which it would be identified. In the plays following *The Staple of News*, Lanier argues, Jonson strikes out in still other generic directions. “As the subtitle² of *The Magnetick Lady* suggests,” Lanier writes, “the final plays seek to reconcile humors comedy, a morally static form because the characters cannot change without violating their essential humor, with the transformative possibilities of romance” (263).

Lanier’s analysis of Jonson’s adjustments in his development of comic strategy in his later comedies is perhaps worth mentioning largely because it coincides with Anne Barton’s tremendously important argument in *Ben Jonson, Dramatist* that Jonson’s Caroline comedies represent a nostalgic return by the poet to the romantic comedy methods of the romanticized reign of Queen Elizabeth. According to Barton, Jonson increasingly looked favorably on native English dramatic models in addition to his cherished classics as his career progressed, beginning with the use of medieval morality models in *The Devil is an Ass* and *The Staple of News*. She argues that the influence of Elizabethan romantic comedy, particularly that of Shakespeare, becomes very influential in *The New Inn* (258-60). Though critics after Barton have sometimes questioned her reading of later Jonsonian comedy as “quintessentially Shakespearean,”³ her influence on subsequent critics of the Caroline plays is evidenced by the frequency of citations of her work in theirs.

Barton’s reading of Elizabethan nostalgia in the late comedies is set not only in relation to the rest of Jonson’s dramatic canon but also in the context of a nostalgia for the reign of the Virgin Queen that had begun during James’s rule and became increasingly pervasive and pronounced in the early years of Charles’s reign (307-9).
good deal of criticism since Barton has followed suit and has added to her historical
contextualization by registering even more specific cultural issues in these late plays,
exploring Jonson’s employment of characterization, social satire, and even the use of

Julie Sanders’s work on the spatial dynamics of staging in *The New Inn* and *The
Magnetic Lady* in the context of Caroline class relations has been mentioned above;
Sanders also explores the use of costumes in *The New Inn* in relation to Caroline
semiotics of dress in “Clothes, Costume and the Politics of Dress in Ben Jonson’s *The
New Inn.*” Martin Butler analyzes the same play in light of the new possibilities for
peaceful relations between the King and Parliament following the death of Buckingham
and preceding the 1629 Parliament in his oft-cited essay, “Late Jonson.” Helen
Ostovich’s “Mistress and Maid: Women’s Friendship in *The New Inn*” reads that play in
light of Queen Henrietta Maria’s importation of “protofeminist principles drawn from the
French salons” and argues that the egalitarian relations between the characters constitute
an attempt “to displace traditional habits of thought based on gender, class, and
favoritism and to substitute a new pattern of behavior based on merit and mutual respect”
(7-8). Glenn J. Clark examines the same play in the context of early Caroline religious
currents in “Civil Conversation, Religious Controversy, and *The New Inn.*” Alan B.
Farmer brings the religious politics of the London citizenry and their fascination with
news from the continent during the Thirty Years War to bear on Jonson’s satire in his
recent “Play-Reading, News-Reading, and Ben Jonson’s *The Staple of News.*”

The studies noted here are only a cross section of the recent historicizing work
that has been done on Jonson’s late comedies. Representative of the most recent critical
work on these plays, they reflect a shift away from the apologies and rehabilitations that Lanier cited as typical of earlier criticism of the Caroline comedies. In fact, recent criticism seems to be much more concerned with how the plays respond to and critique their contemporary culture than it is with the place of these late comedies within the Jonsonian canon. In this chapter, I will attempt to build on this recent criticism of *The Staple of News, The New Inn,* and *The Magnetic Lady* in exploring how Jonson’s comic dramaturgy evolves in these late plays, composed after a nine year absence from the public stage.

Once again, I will suggest that Jonson’s comic strategy can be discerned most clearly in the employment of the clever servant figures at the heart of the action in these comedies. The clever servants in these comedies, Pennyboy Canter in *The Staple of News,* Prudence – and to some extent Lovel – in *The New Inn,* and Mr. Compass in *The Magnetic Lady* share three characteristics in their respective plays that have important ramifications for the moral satire of these late comedies.

First, all three of these characters are depicted in their respective plays as meritorious paragons of virtue. In this respect they differ markedly from the clever servants of Jonson’s high comedies, such as Mosca and Face, who are con men *par excellence,* and even from the clever servants of the early humors comedies, Brainworm and Carlo Buffone, whose only real virtue is their wit. Like most of their dramatic predecessors, however, the servants in the Caroline plays are, by virtue of their wit, able to control the action of their respective comedies and play upon the follies of the gulls around them. Unlike Wasp and Pug, they are not duped by the disordered society in which they find themselves. There is some dramatic precedence for the way that Jonson
draws these characters in the poet-scholar heroes of the Comical Satires, Macilente, Crites, and Horace, but none of these scholarly satirists, with the possible exception of Macilente,⁴ are depicted as servants, and, as such, their inheritance as critiquing satirists is more due to the poetic speakers in the satires of Juvenal and Horace than to the clever slaves of Plautus and Terence.

The second trait shared by all three of these characters in the late plays is their penchant for didactic, almost homiletic, satiric critique. Jonson’s earlier servant characters fulfill their socially corrective satiric function by exposing and ridiculing the dupes and gulls that surround them; they play on their follies and vices and eventually purge their societies of vice by deflating the hypocritical poses of the humors characters and provoking them to their vicious self-destruction. In this respect, their satiric correction is wholly negative, that is to say, non-redemptive. Buffone’s scurrilous jests and insults do not make Sogliardo any wiser, nor do Mosca’s machinations result in the reformation of any of the greedy gulls in Volpone; Wasp’s ceaseless upbraiding of Bartholomew Cokes for being a fool, though appropriate to his pupil’s folly and satirically effective for the audience, is ultimately bootless for his charge. In these late plays, on the contrary, the moral critique that is dished out by the Canter and Prudence results in the repentance of their young patrons, Pennyboy Jr.⁵ and Lady Frampul, respectively. The plotting of Mr. Compass in The Magnetic Lady eventually brings about the reconciliation of the various humors characters and the qualified moral amendment of the arch-usurer, Sir Moath Interest. As the servants in the late plays are more virtuous, so their satiric critique is more effective in achieving moral reform.
Finally, the virtuous merit of each of the servant characters in these late comedies is rewarded with their gaining a part of a substantial inheritance and with social advancement, which the plays encode as just compensation for their virtues. In this regard, these servant characters are the antitypes of the conning schemers of the middle comedies, Face and Mosca, who attempt to raise themselves to gentility with the ill-gotten financial fruits of their fraud. Lovel and Prudence are both raised to wealth and rank in *The New Inn* through prosperous marriages that are depicted as proper recompense for the virtues that they display in their speech and bearing during the day’s sports. Mr. Compass marries the heiress, Placentia Steele and thus takes control of her substantial fortune. Though the play does not explicitly depict this marriage as a reward of virtue, *per se*, it is abundantly clear that Compass is the most meriting of any of the young lady’s potential suitors. Pennyboy Canter, the servant figure in *The Staple of News*, is technically an exception here. Because he, as the patriarch of the Pennyboys, is the rightful holder of the family fortune, his resumption of his place and fortune at the end of the play when he drops his disguise as a canting beggar cannot precisely be called advancement or an inheritance. However, the play clearly establishes that his right to the family wealth and rank is not only a right in the legal sense of the term, but also in the moral sense, and his restoration to his estate when he finally overcomes Picklock’s attempt to dupe him of his fortune is a move to wealth and power on account of virtue that parallels the meritorious advances of Lovel, Prudence, and Compass.

In depicting the advancement in rank of these characters based on their virtues rather than their fortunes, Jonson images a fantasy of a social meritocracy that his poetry – both dramatic and non-dramatic – has imaginatively argued for throughout his career.
Here again, the social critique in the late plays, as opposed to the middle comedies, is positive rather than negative: in these plays, Jonson portrays what an ideal social hierarchy might look like, whereas in the middle plays, he illustrates the detrimental effects to a society that distributes honors by means of sale rather than according to merit. As Butler has noted, the death of Buckingham in 1628, and consequently the end of his stranglehold on the avenues of Stuart patronage, may have spurred the poet’s entertainment of the possibility of a “return” to the “ideal” of Tudor patronage, where honors were distributed according to virtues.

Of course, the ideal of Tudor patronage and the nostalgia for Elizabeth’s reign that was its context was a highly romanticized concept. Sanders notes that the idea of Elizabethan rule that pervaded Caroline England was “itself a mythologized construct” (51). Still, as Barton describes at length, the dubious veracity of the ideology of Elizabethan nostalgia did not make it any less influential in the minds of many poets and statesmen of Caroline England, who looked unfavorably upon the Stuart court’s immoderate spending, inflation of honors, and levying of new taxes and impositions, especially in comparison with the conservatism of Elizabeth’s court. Barton cites as one example, the digression appended to Fulke Greville’s *The Life of the Renowned Sir Philip Sidney*, which is harshly critical of James by means of comparing him unfavorably with his royal predecessor. Barton notes,

> Every virtue Greville singles out in Elizabeth’s government can be matched by a corresponding failure in that of James. She was the champion of European Protestantism and enemy of Spain, an heroic monarch who surrounded herself with an hereditary, not a newly created,
nobility of sound “nature, education and practice”. Her court was temperate and moral, and she maintained a “reciprocal paradise of mutual human duties” between herself and her people. (311) [quotes from Greville’s text]

It is important to note here Greville’s emphasis on the hereditary and virtuous Elizabethan nobility who had merited their rank, not only by their blood, but by their “nature, education, and practice,” all humanist virtues.

As this study has noted in the discussion of Jonson’s early humors comedy in Chapter One, Elizabeth, herself, had marketed social advancement in her reign, selling arms of gentility in order to raise money that was badly needed by her administration during and following her costly war with Spain. In the years following her death, however, the virtuousness of her administration was romanticized by those who were increasingly disillusioned with the practices of James’s court, and in reality, the commercialization of patronage under Stuart rule far outstripped the practice of selling titles in Elizabethan England. It was, after all, James who was the first to openly market positions within the actual peerage, beginning with the creation and sale of baronetcies in 1611. As Sheila Walsh notes, “It was, in fact, the Stuart monarchs who institutionalized the commercialization of the acquisition of ‘nobility,’ linking its monetary value to service to the state” (239).

The scale of the marketing of patronage increased noticeably during the Duke of Buckingham’s ascendancy as the royal favorite of James and then Charles, a time during which the Duke had almost sole control over the dispensation of honors, privileges, and titles. Alan G. R. Smith writes in his history of sixteenth and seventeenth century
England, “The open sale of titles and offices had begun before [Buckingham’s] rise to power, but during the years of his supremacy it became more blatant. Between 1615 and 1628 about thirty English and forty Irish and Scottish peerages were sold for about £350,000 altogether” (274). What made the sale of honors so especially odious to many in Stuart England was the corruption that accompanied it. As Smith details, Buckingham made himself obscenely rich from his marketing of patronage: “The Crown got less than half the money [from the sale peerages], with most of the remainder going to Buckingham. It was a policy which brought the peerage as a whole into disrepute and created tensions between old and new members of the House of Lords” (274). Buckingham’s notoriety for graft resulted in his unsuccessful impeachment by Parliament in 1626 and eventually his assassination by John Felton in 1628. Jonson’s probable ill feelings towards Buckingham are posited by Barton, who notes, “Significantly, Jonson never wrote a poem in praise of James’s beloved Buckingham, nor did he mourn his death” (315). Jonson was, however, summoned before the Attorney General on suspicion of his having written a poem in praise of Buckingham’s assassin, a charge of which he was acquitted (Barton 315-16).

Jonson’s distaste for Buckingham and his administration of patronage, assuming it existed, would be consistent with the acridly critical attitude that his poetry ubiquitously displays towards the court’s commercialization of arms and titles. The satire of the market of honors, which Jonson’s earlier comedies implicitly make in the characterization of un-meriting gentlemen and knights like Sogliardo, Bartholomew Cokes, Esquire, and Sir Petronell Flash, is again taken up explicitly in these late comedies. Host Goodstock (later revealed to be Lord Frampul), in The New Inn, for
instance, laments the corruption of virtue that has resulted from the sale of honors in
conversation with the gallant Lovel over whether or not to allow his son, Frank, to enter
Lovel’s service as a page. Lovel recommends service at court as a virtuous course of life
because the institutions of court are “the nourceries of nobility” (1.3.51), to which the
Host responds,

I that was, when the nourceries selfe, was noble,
And only virtue made it, not the mercate,
That titles were not vented at the drum,
Or common out-cry; goodnesse gaue the greatnesse,
And greatnesse worship; Euery house became
An Academy of honour, and those parts –
We see departed, in the practice, now,
Quite from the institution. (1.3.52-59)

The Host specifically ascribes the degeneration of the court to “the mercate” of titles,
“vented at the drum,” as they are in his day. Significantly, he draws a distinction
between the contemporary, corrupt court and an imagined court of the past that raised
individuals to rank based on their virtuous merit, when “goodnesse gaue the
greatnesse.” His nostalgia for a bygone virtuous court, to which the current Caroline
court pales in comparison, is reminiscent of Greville’s remembrance of the more “noble”
court of Elizabeth.

The dramatic action of The New Inn presents a microcosmic reversion to the
older, idealized court practices of patronage, most explicitly in the raising of Prudence to
a position of nobility solely on account of her virtue and in spite of her monetary poverty.
Lord Latimer makes the point crystal clear when he rejects the offers of dowry from Lords Frampul and Beaufort as well as from Lovel in taking Prudence as his bride. Rejecting the money, he proclaims,

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Spare all your promis’d portions, she is a dowry} \\
&\text{So all-sufficient in her virtue and manners,} \\
&\text{That fortune cannot adde to her.} 
\end{align*}
\]

(5.5.143-45)

As has been noted above, similar gestures are made in the raising to rank and fortune of Lovel in this play, and Compasse and Ironside in *The Magnetic Lady*. The money allegory in *The Staple of News* makes the same critique of matching rank to wealth with even more force, if more obliquely. In that play, Pennyboy Jr.’s intemperate handling of Pecunia, the personification of wealth, results in his disinheritance and loss of rank. It is only when he virtuously amends his ways that he is restored as the heir of the estate. His possession of wealth, that is to say, merits him nothing; only his virtue secures his prospects of nobility.9

Doubtless, there is an element of personal wish-fulfillment in Jonson’s fantasies of meritocracy in these comedies, which may have well been motivated by the poet’s relative loss of favor and employment in the new royal administration. As biographer David Riggs notes, one of Charles’s early acts upon his ascension to the throne, in an effort to reemphasize the “gravity and decorum” of the court and to establish its fiscal responsibility, was to “dispense with the Twelfth Night masque” (295). Riggs postulates that this loss of the opportunity for continuous royal patronage was what drove Jonson back to the public stage. “When he was taken into the King’s service in 1616,” Riggs writes, “he left the stage; when he ceased to find employment at court in 1626, he
returned to the playhouse and offered *The Staple of News*, his fist comedy in over a decade, to Caroline audiences” (295). Barton, moreover, notes that Jonson did not share the same friendship and intimacy with Charles that he had with James (314). Jonson’s probable frustration with the loss of favor and the privileges of being James’s unofficial poet laureate is registered in the Epilogue that he appends to *The New Inn*, when he complains, “And had he [Jonson] liu’d the care of King, and Queene, / His Art in somthing more yet had beene seene” (21-22).

Riggs argues that Jonson saw the court performance of *The Staple of News* as “an opportunity to advise the new monarch about the condition of the realm and to offer his own services as Charles’s counselor,” in effect, to re-establish himself in a relationship to the sovereign much like he had with James (296). In Riggs’s reading of the play,

Penniboy, Jr., is an allegorical image of the Prince who is confronted with a choice between good and evil counselors. Jonson even hints that Young Penniboy can be directly identified with Charles I, though he does not press this analogy. The topical allegory in *The Staple of News* mainly concerns the psychomachia between Frank Penniboy, the good counselor who is “a kin to the Poet” (4th Int., 4-5), and the newspapermen. (296)

Insofar as Riggs’s reading of the allegory in *The Staple* is accurate, it represents an example of the meritocracy that Jonson’s host nostalgically imagines in *The New Inn*, as well as an imaginative projection of the court poet Jonson as a beneficiary of that sort of meritocracy, as he had been to some extent under James.
Anne Barton notes that Jonson’s employment as James’s unofficial poet laureate and his intimate relationship with the king tempered his nostalgia for the ideal of the Elizabethan court. After all, James, not Elizabeth, was Jonson’s royal patron, almost indeed a friend, the monarch upon whom he came to depend professionally. It was a complex dependence. Jonson was not only intimate with James, as he had never been with Elizabeth; he seems to have felt a genuine personal liking for him as a man. James’s unabashed and earthy humor, hard drinking, pedantry, even the royal literary efforts, were all calculated to strike a responsive chord in Jonson. At the same time, he can scarcely have believed James to be what he called him in the fourth of his Epigrams: the “best of Poets” and the “best of Kings” (2, 1). (314)

This type of complex relationship between poet and patron is described to a certain extent in Jonson’s “Epistle to Master John Selden,” where, as noted in previous chapters, he expresses the difficulty of the balancing the poet’s moral duty to correct his superiors with the reality of his need to praise them in order to continue receiving patronage, admitting, “I have too oft preferr’d / Men past their termes, and prais’d some names too much, / But ’twas with purpose to have made them such” (Underwood XIV 20-22).

The court prologue to The Staple of News announces Jonson’s willingness to continue in the capacity of teacherly court poet for Charles as he had for James. In it, the poet announces the play as being “fitted for your Maiesties disport,” yet also designed to “shew you common follies” (2, 11). Like most of Jonson’s comedies and his Jacobean
court masques, this play is intended to serve the courtly audience by both delighting and instructing it.

As noted above, the Caroline plays place a heavy emphasis on the instructive in the *dulce et utile* equation. One way that they do this, as I have been suggesting, is by modeling the ideal of meritocracy in the rewarding and advancement of characters on account of their inherent virtues, but the plays’ characters also engage in a great deal of moralizing commentary. The Host’s lines on the court, quoted above from *The New Inn*, are one example of this sermonizing tendency in the late comedies. The majority of these instances of instructing and reproving commentary are placed, however, in the mouths of the servant characters. Pennyboy Canter’s lines are almost entirely composed of proverbs or satiric reproof through the first four acts of *The Staple of News*. Moreover, evocative of Jonson’s idealization of the poet’s duty (and privilege) to reprove his patron, the instruction or correction is often given from a social inferior to a superior. Prudence, assuring Lovel that she will not let her mistress get away with mistreating him during the day’s sports, says to him, “I will be bold to hold the glasse vp to her, / To shew her Ladyship where she hath err’d” (1.6.76-77). And in the course of the play, she does just that.

The homiletic tone that is so increased in Jonson’s late comedies is perhaps also a result of Jonson’s own personal developments. Riggs notes that in Jonson’s later years, he turned his thoughts more increasingly to matters of divinity and relates the account of one Nicholas Oldisworth, who visited Jonson in the early 1630s “hoping ‘to heare / From him some flashes and fantastique Guere [gear]’” (331). As Riggs describes, Oldisworth was somewhat frustrated to find that “the elderly master behaved more like a divine than
a comic playwright” (331). Oldisworth is quoted as saying that he was concerned following his visit, lest “future Times will, by a grosse Mistake, / Johnson a Bishop, not a Poët make” (qtd. in Riggs 331). This preacherly voice that Jonson apparently adopted in his later years is very evident in the dialogue of his servant satirists in the Caroline comedies, most especially in the mouth of Pennyboy Canter in *The Staple of News*.

I

Lanier states of *The Staple*, “The themes of *The Staple of Newes*, abuse of money and language, are of course no news at all to readers of Jonson, for these are the governing obsessions of all his earlier plays; it is the form that surprises” (254). It does indeed seem to be the hybrid form of this play, which combines the dramatic forms of a medieval moral allegory and a Jacobean city comedy, that gives many critics pause in approaching this play. Raphael Shargel, in “A Stewed Comedy: Chaos and Authority in *The Staple of News*,” states the problem of dramatic form in a way that emphasizes what he seems to believe is the incompatibility of the play’s two dominant forms:

Without question, the play is riddled with jarring contradictions. For example, its main plot features action and nomenclature that suggests the allegorical conventions of the prodigal drama: Pennyboy Junior, a young heir, squanders his father’s wealth while wooing a damsel named Aurelia Clara Pecunia, “golden bright money.” Jonson seems to treat such conventions seriously rather than parodically, as he had in the past. Yet the tropes of medieval and earlier Renaissance morality plays seem out of place in this city comedy of 1626, which satirizes the new genre of

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journalism and is rife with detailed references to the bustle and mayhem of contemporary London. (45)

Herford and Simpson explain the mixing of the allegorical and the humors comedy elements by arguing for the influence of Jonson’s nine years as a writer of court masques on the play’s composition. In their estimation the city comedy elements of the Staple and the Jeerers correspond to the unruly antimasque while the moral allegory of the Pennyboys and Pecunia corresponds to the masque proper. They argue that “if his later masques had assimilated something of the method of comedy, the play with which he now returned to the stage showed, in its turn, traces of the masque-writing of the immediately preceding years” (2.170). Devra Rowland Kifer, as noted above, argues that the play should be most properly read as a festive comedy: “Much of the criticism of The Staple of News has been concerned with the presence or absence of unity among the disparate elements of satire, morality, and allegory. Although all of these elements are present, the play is most properly viewed as a festive comedy whose central structure is a morality account of the salvation of Pennyboy Junior” (329). The lack of critical consensus as to how the comic form of the play is supposed to work – or even if it does work\(^\text{10}\) – indicates the extent to which Jonson departs from the comic paradigm of his older humors comedies in this play, a departure that leads Shargel to ask, “What was Jonson up to?” (46).

As has been noted in brief above, Lanier answers the question by arguing that Jonson uses the allegorical frame because he is consciously trying to abstract his moral satire from a specifically contemporary social criticism that would tie his work too closely to his historical moment. Lanier summarizes his argument, saying,
Thus we might view *The Staple of Newes* as Jonson’s attempt to address not only Renaissance London but literary posterity as well, an attempt to establish his place as a dramatist of lasting and not merely topical importance. To do so, Jonson consciously chose to eliminate as much as possible those details that would mark him as a dramatist of his age. Instead he chose allegory, a deliberately universalized form, a timeless mode in which he might cast the characteristic themes of the 1616 Folio for all ages. (257)

Lanier’s speculation as to Jonson’s motivation – to create a timeless comedy that would speak to humankind universally – seems consistent with Jonson’s conception of his poetic vocation, but his insistence that Jonson “chose to eliminate as much as possible those details that would mark him as a dramatist of his age” seems at odds with the play’s vivid depiction of the Staple of News itself, which, by its very nature is necessarily tied to cultural currency. Lanier does account for the prominence of the news office in his reading, arguing that it is a foil for the universal morals of the play’s main allegory: “Most obviously, in *Staple* Jonson inveighs against the dangers of news, ephemeral bits of information fastened upon for their novelty and not for their enduring moral significance” (257).

Doubtless, Jonson does condemn the culture’s fascination with news, but the condemnation is not only based on the “ephemeral” nature of news itself; primarily the play condemns the news put out by the Staple, and implicitly by the type of news printers that it is parodying, because the “news” is patently untrue. Jonson’s address “To The Readers” before the opening of Act III makes this much clear, when asks his audience
To consider the Newes here vented, to be none of his Newes, or any reasonable mans; but Newes made like the times Newes, (a weekly cheat to draw mony) and could not be fitter reprehended, then in raising this ridiculous Office of the Staple, wherein the age may see her owne folly, or hunger and thirst after publish’d pamphlets of Newes, set out ev’ry Saturday, but made all at home, & no syllable of truth in them: then which there cannot be a greater disease in nature, or a fouler scorne put upon the times [emphasis added]. (8-16)

Alan B. Farmer emphasizes the importance of the Staple’s traffic in falsehoods for the purpose of the play’s satire in his essay, “Play-Reading, News-Reading and Jonson’s The Staple of News,” which argues that Jonson’s dramatized Staple satirically critiques the role of excessive interest in the progress of the Thirty Years War and other matters of continental religious factionalism in the news-reading publics of Caroline England. Farmer argues, “Whatever modern critics may think of the news pamphlets from the 1620s and 1630s, the period’s editors, publishers, and readers considered them to be of vital cultural and political importance, an importance that Jonson’s play is dedicated to undermining by revealing the pamphlets’ utter lack of truth” (129). As Farmer goes on to demonstrate, news publishing and reading in Caroline England, especially with regards to news about the Thirty Years, was essentially a matter of trading in unsubstantiated rumors that in turn acted as fuel for already strained relations between religious factions in England.11

Both the false and the factious nature of the Staple’s news is abundantly clear in the scenes of the play set in the news office. When Cymbal, the master of the Staple, and
Fitton, his chief emissary, are showing Pennyboy Jr. around the Staple, the news their office produces is repeatedly referred to as being “Fresh and new stamp’d,” or “Fresh, from the forge,” indicating that it is made up on site (1.5.62-3, 81). Cymbal and Fitton boast of the qualifications of one of the clerks that the Staple employs as one who “knows Newes well, can sort and ranke ‘hem . . . / And for a need can make ‘hem” (1.5.121-22). Throughout the scene that introduces the Staple, the false – constructed as opposed to reported – nature of its news is clearly established. Fitton makes the point explicitly when he second’s Cymbal’s definition of news as that which is not yet printed, saying so long as it is but written,¹² “Though it be ne’er so false, it runnes Newes still” (1.5.50).

The intimate connection between the news and religious faction is established in the third act, where the Staple is fully on display, dishing out news to a bevy of customers, who consume it as if it were a commodity. During this dissemination of news from the continent, Thom the Barber, for whom Pennyboy Jr. has purchased a clerk’s seat in the office, initially reports only news of Catholics. When Thom’s fellow clerk delivers news that the Protestant Hollanders have found an invisible eel “To swimme the hauen at Dunkirke, and sinke all / The shipping there,” Pennyboy Jr. inquires of his barber, “Why ha’ not you this [news of the eel], Thom?” to which Cymbal replies, “Because he keeps the Pontificall side” (3.2.60-63). Pennyboy Jr. is scandalized that his man is allied to the Catholic cause, albeit only in a manner of reporting the news:

How, change sides, Thom. ‘Twas neuer in my thought
To put thee vp against our selues. Come downe,
Quickly. (3.2.64-66)
This division of news into Protestant and Catholic, together with Pennyboy Jr’s insistence that his man report the Protestant side, illustrates the religious and factious nature of the Caroline news industry. This critique is driven home further later in the scene when the Staple’s customers determine which news they want to buy according to whether or not it is good news for their religious persuasion. It makes no difference whether or not the news is true; the only concern is for whether it bodes well for those of their faction.

The satire of the Staple is not only, or even primarily, aimed at the factious and undiscerning nature of the Caroline reading public, however. As Jonson’s address to the readers says, the Staple is principally erected as “a weekly cheat to draw mony” (10). The news that panders to religious faction is simply a means by which to fleece the customers of their money. In this way, the Staple is like the Alchemist’s shop run by Face and Subtle; as they had lured and conned customers with the bogus promises of vast wealth by means of alchemy, so Cymbal and Fitton lure their customers with fallacious gossip that panders to their religious feelings. The Staple is also an example of an absurd monopoly, similar to the ridiculous projects proposed by Meercraft in The Devil is an Ass. As with Subtle’s lab and Meercraft’s projects, the Staple is clearly drawn as an unscrupulous and corrupt institution run by con men in order to make themselves rich by fleecing others.

It is in its depiction as a corrupt institution bent on obtaining money by unscrupulous means that the Office of the Staple fits into the overarching moral allegory, in which the “Every-Heir,” Pennyboy Jr. must overcome the attempts by rival suitors to possess the Lady Pecunia, who is the allegory’s personification of wealth, by proving himself more virtuous in his acquisition and use of money than they do (Kifer 331).
Cymbal, the Staple’s master and one of these rival suitors, erects the office in order to lure Pecunia to reside in his place of business. The allegory characterizes Cymbal as a suitor whose virtue falls short of meriting Pecunia because he attempts to gain possession of her – i.e. make himself rich – by the unscrupulous means of peddling falsehoods as news. Pennyboy Jr.’s lawyer, Picklock, warns him of the challenge from Cymbal just after the young heir has first visited the Staple: “Now, Sir, Cymball thinkes, / The Master here, and gouernor o’ the Staple, / By his fine arts, and pompe of his great place / To draw her! . . .  But your bounty, / Person, and brauery must atchieve her” (1.6.55-62).

Cymbal attempts to woo Pecunia away from Pennyboy Jr. right under his nose, as it were. When the young heir brings his Lady to the shop, the Staple master pulls her aside and courts her with promises of a lavish existence vaguely reminiscent of Epicure Mammon’s promises to Doll in *The Alchemist*:

If it will please your Grace to sojourne here,
And take my rooffe for couert, you shall know
The rites belonging to your blood, and birth,
Which few can apprehend: . . .

. . . I would haue
You waited on by Ladies, and your traine
Borne vp by persons of quality, and honour,
Your meet should be seru’d in with curious dances,
And set vpon the boord, with virgin hands,
Tun’d to their voices; not a dish remou’d,
But to the Musicke, nor a drop of wine,
Mixt, with his water, without Harmony. (3.2.222-235)

As Epicure Mammon’s luxurious promises and intentions for the use of vast wealth were satirized as sordidly extravagant in The Alchemist, so Cymbal’s opulent dreams of the luxury of possessing great wealth are critiqued as vicious in this play. After hearing the above suit and a subsequent brief idolatrous encomium to Pecunia in which Cymbal implores her to “strike the people blind with admiration,” Pennyboy Canter, the play’s satiric servant figure and the moral voice of the poet, castigates the sumptuous and greedy nature of Cymbal’s suit:

Why, that’s the end of wealth! thrust riches outward,
and remaine beggers within: contemplate nothing
But the vile sordid things of time, place, money,
And let the noble, and the precious goe,
Vertue and honesty, hang ‘hem; poore thinne membranes
Of honour; who repects them? O, the Fates!
How hath all iust, true reputation fall’n,
Since money, this base money ‘gan to haue any! (3.2.241-248)

Given Cymbal’s extravagant intentions for life with Pecunia, it is fitting that his suit falls apart when, attempting to contract for her custody, he visits Pennyboy Sr., who is her guardian until Pennyboy Jr. comes into full possession of his estate, because he inadvertently gets the old usurer started on a tirade about the immoderate spending of contemporary culture. Cymbal merely tries to interest Pennyboy Sr. in his venture by offering to split his obscene profits, which amount to half of the Staple’s net income, with the old man if he will let Pecunia reside at the Staple. Pennyboy Sr. is interested in what
appears to be a sure money-making scheme, but the mention of good profitable business leads him to contrast it with his hatred of the contemporary irresponsible and prodigal spending habits, habits which, ironically unbeknownst to him, Cymbal has promised Pecunia to engage in. The thought of the culture’s immoderate spending, spurred by the two percent reduction in the interest rate, gradually works Pennyboy Sr. into a fury:

The trade of money, is fall’n, two i’ the hundred.
That was a certaine trade, while th’age was thrifty,
And men good husbands, look’d vnto their stockes,
Had their mindes bounded; now the publike Riot
Prostitutes all, scatters away in coaches,
In foot-mens coates, and waiting womens gownes,
The must haue veluet hanches (with a pox)
Now taken vp, and yet not pay the vse;

Bate of the vse? I am mad with this times manners. (3.4.34-42)

As the old usurer’s fury builds, his willingness to listen to Cymbal’s suit wanes, and he ends up throwing the Staple-master out without hearing the end of his proposal.

Like Cymbal, Pennyboy Sr. is another would-be possessor of the Lady Pecunia, whose pursuit and use of wealth is decidedly unvirtuous. Pennyboy Sr. is a tight-fisted money bawd like his dramatic predecessors Sordido in Every Man Out of His Humor and Security in Eastward Ho!. Like Volpone, he is an idolater of money. When the play opens, he is still in possession of Pecunia because Pennyboy Jr. has not yet come to claim his inheritance. His opening lines, addressed the Lady, who, again, personifies wealth,
resonate with the adulation of money that Volpone expresses in his opening paean to gold. Pennyboy Sr. greets Pecunia, saying,

   Your Grace is sad, me thinks, and melancholy!
   You doe not looke vpon me with that face,
   As you were wont, my Goddesse, bright Pecunia:
   Alhtough your Grace be falne of, two i’ the hundred,
   In vulgar estimation; yet am I,
   Your Graces seruant still: and teach this body,
   To bend, and these my aged knees to buckle,
   In adoration, and iust worship of you. (2.1.1-8)

Throughout this scene, he continues to laud Pecunia’s divine attributes and express his religious devotion to her, exposing his excessive and vicious greed.

    Pennyboy Sr.’s vice is, as it is with all of Jonson’s greedy usurers, is his propensity to hoard, rather than make responsible use of his money, a vice that would be particularly looked down upon by a money-strapped Caroline court. His irritation at the prodigal spending of the times hints at his reluctance to part with any of his money, but his parsimony goes well beyond a hatred of unnecessary spending. Shortly after his worshipful greeting of Pecunia, he is visited by his cook, Lickfinger, to whom he is selling foodstuffs that have been given him, presumably to pay off loans, because he would rather have the money than the meat (2.3.70-71). He only asks for Lickfinger to “remember meat for my two dogs: / Fat flaps of mutton; kidneys; rumps of veale; / Good plenteous scraps; my maid shall eat the reliques” (2.3.77-79). Pennyboy Sr.’s money lust is so extreme he prefers to maintain his household on scraps – feeding his maid what the
dogs leave – rather lose any money by spending it on food. Later in the play, Pecunia herself, once free of his clutches and in the Apollo room with Pennyboy Jr., complains of her ill use at the old miser’s hands in allegorical language that suggests the manner in which he has hoarded money: “Neuer vnfortunate Princesses, / Was vs’d so by a Iaylor. Ask my women, / Band, you can tell, and Statute, how he has vs’d me,/ Kept me close prisoner, vnder twenty bolts. / . . . / would ha’ smother’d me in a chest, / And strangl’d me in leather” (4.3.30-33, 41-2). The Canter, disguised as a beggar and servant to Pennyboy Jr., sums up Pennyboy Sr.’s vice when he compares their apparent states: “wee should be brothers though: / For you are neere as wretched as my selfe, / You dare not vse your money, and I haue none” (2.5.17-19). The Canter’s lines reveal that Pennyboy Sr.’s greed is not only wicked, but self-defeating. If his only use for money is to accumulate it in vast quantities, he may as well have none.

If Pennyboy Sr. is unworthy of his wealth because he refuses to spend any of it, then Pennyboy Jr., for the balance of the play, is depicted as unmeriting of his inheritance for the opposite reason: that he can’t seem to stop spending it. The play’s opening act reveals him, upon the point of twenty-one and about to come into his majority, surrounded by a tailor, a spurrier, a haberdasher, a barber, a shoemaker, and a linener, all of whom are likely overcharging him for their services, since he refuses to read any more of their bills than the totals. “I’ll read onely the summes, / And passe ‘hem straight,’” he offhandedly claims (1.3.21). Like his dramatic predecessor, the naïf Fungoso, he mistakenly believes that maintaining an expensive wardrobe will effect his advancement in gentle society, a delusion his tailor feeds (1.2.108-17). Modeling his new attire, Pennyboy absurdly equates fashion with wit, rhapsodizing on the virtues of cloths:
I wonder, Gentlemen,

And men of meanes will not maintaine themselues

Fresher in wit, I meane in clothes, to the highest.

For hee that’s out o’ clothes, is out o’ fashion,

And out of fashion, is out of countenance,

And out o’ countenance, is out o’ Wit. (1.2.123-28)

Pennyboy Jr.’s overestimation of a fashionable appearance links him to a train of Jonsonian fops who only cultivate the maintenance of their wardrobes at the expense of their more important inner virtues.

Spending too much on clothes, though, is not Pennyboy Jr.’s only, or even chief vice. It is only one symptom of his general prodigality with money, which he begins to show in earnest when he has taken Pecunia from the custody of Pennyboy Sr. While they are at the Staple, in a state of foolish distraction reminiscent of the behavior of Bartholomew Cokes, he puts himself in danger of losing her to Cymbal. At dinner, he insists she kiss all of the jeerers repeatedly and passes her about so freely that Pennyboy Sr. seems to be not entirely amiss when, after he has been rudely turned away in his quest to fetch the Lady back home, he declares bitterly, “Pecunia is a whore” (4.3.82). In the allegory, of course, all of these foolish, cuckold-like gestures indicate that Pennyboy Jr. is an irresponsible spendthrift, too prodigal to merit custody of Pecunia. His vice is just opposite to Pennyboy Sr.’s, as Pennyboy Canter observes early in the play, when, watching the younger Pennyboy carelessly discharge his bills to this clothiers, he cites the young heir as an exemplum of a popular proverb: “See! / The difference ’twixt the
couteous, and the prodigall! / ‘The Couteous man neuer has money! and / The Prodigall will haue none shortly!’” (1.3.38-40).

The final group of suitors to Pecunia are the jeerers, a group of “mocking, flouting, Iackes,” as Pennyboy Sr. calls them (2.3.85). The jeerers are a group of ne’er-do-wells who go about heckling whomever they can find to poke fun at and insult. As Madrigal, the poetaster of the group, explains to Pennyboy Jr., “We ieere al kind of persons / We meete withal, of any ranck or quality, / And if we cannot ieere them, we ieere ourselues” (4.1.7-9). The favorite victim of the jeerers is Pennyboy Sr., whom they attempt to jeer into loaning them some money near the end of the second act. He, of course, refuses to give them any because they no longer have any credit. The conversation between Pennyboy Sr. and the jeerers produces a telling critique of the overvaluation of money in Caroline England, as, for instance, when the usurer’s refusal to lend money is met with Shunfield’s charge that he has no honor:

P.SE. I haue no monie, gentlemen. SHV. This stocke,

He has no sense of any virtue, honour,

Gentrie or merit. P. SE. You say very right,

My meritorious Captaine, (as I take it!)

Merit will keepe no house, nor pay no house rent.

Will Mistresse Merit goe to mercat, thinke you?

Set on the pot, or feed the family?

Will Gentry cleare with the Butcher? or the Baker? (2.4.58-65)

Pennyboy Sr.’s reason for refusal indicates the extent to which merit has taken a back seat to money in Caroline society. It is interesting to note, also, in his speech, the
parallelism between “merit” and “gentry,” as if he still equates honors with virtues. This parallelism notwithstanding, though, Pennyboy Sr. prefers money to honor; later he asserts money’s superiority to “curtesie” as well (2.4.100-111). This exposure of the money driven ethics of English culture is the result of the jeering game, but on the whole, the jeering game has no more real satiric effect than the game of vapors in *Bartholomew Fair*, and, rather like the participants of that game, the jeerers themselves are a rather motley collection of stock Jonsonian humors characters. They consist of Madrigal, the poetaster; Fitton, the con man from the Staple; Shunfield, a braggart soldier whose very name belies his lack of courage; Pied-Mantle, a pandering pursuivant at arms; and Almanac, a bogus doctor. Though the jeerers almost accidentally serve a satiric function in exposing and ridiculing Pennyboy Sr.’s greed, they are no more virtuous and worthy of possession of Pecunia for all that. The play indicates that money would be little better off in the hands of this rabble, who are interested primarily in acquiring sufficient means to “keep [themselves] in good tobacco pipes” (2.4.149).

The jeerers are exposed by the Canter for being poor excuses for their various professions late in Act Four after Pennyboy Jr. proposes to make them all professors in his “Can ters Colledge” (4.4.82). At hearing his son’s plans to squander his inheritance in founding this ridiculous college and employing the jeerers as professers, Pennyboy Canter, or Frank Pennyboy as he is revealed to be, can no longer maintain his disguise, and in revealing himself, also exposes the jeerers for the shams that they are. He tells Pennyboy Jr.,

> If thou had’st sought out good, and virtuous persons
>
> Of these professions: I’had lou’d thee, and them.
For these shall neuer haue that plea against me,
Or colour of aduantage, that I hate
Their callings, but their manners, and their vices. (4.4.135-39)

He then proceeds, one by one, to show that each of the jeerers is a fraud in his profession: that Shunfield is a coward, Almanac a quack, Pied-Mantle a corrupter of the nobility for sufficient fees, and so on.

With Pennyboy Canter’s prevention of the realization of the Canters’ College while the idea is still in its infancy, an act which simultaneously disqualifies the jeerers and Pennyboy Jr., finally, as worthy possessors of Pecunia’s wealth, the play leaves the audience with no possible meritorious suitors to the Lady, except for the Canter, who has explicitly refused the offer of money (1.3.55-60). The situation is not surprising for Jonsonian comedy. Jonson’s earlier comedies often depict societies in which nobody is finally wholly virtuous; the resigned realization that all are guilty of sin at the end of *Bartholomew Fair* is a prominent example. Raphael Shargel notes the similarity between *The Staple of News* and Jonson’s earlier comedies in this regard. He argues, “While *The Staple of News* reflects a complex web of oppositions that forbid resolution, the play is not unique for doing so; it is only the most outstanding example of dramatic inconclusiveness in the Jonson canon” (67). Shargel further concludes that in its collection of characters the play “celebrates a number of apparently antithetical values – formal perfection and dramatic chaos, realism and allegory, the dictatorial integrity of the master poet and the more democratic reign of a mirthful but dilatory collective – while refusing to allow one to triumph over the other” (68). Shargel’s reading, though, seems to overvalue the roles of the humors characters and underestimate the authority given to
the satiric voice of Pennyboy Canter, which he reads as no more authoritative or moral than the taunts of the jeerers (59).

The triumph of the Canter over the jeerers, however, is clearly demonstrated in the play’s final act when he comes upon them at Pennyboy Sr.’s where they are once again engaged in their favorite act, jeering the old miser. Their jeering of Pennyboy Sr. is depicted as being somewhat perversely cruel in the final act, as the old man has gone mad with the loss of his Pecunia and is pathetically holding a trial of his dogs to determine which of them is responsible for offending the lady and causing her to leave. When the cook Lickfinger warns the jeerers of the approach of the Canter, who has just reduced them to nothing in his demolition of the idea of the Canters’ College, they scatter in fear of his satiric power:

LIC. Arme, arme you, Gentlemen Ieerers, th’old Canter

Is comming vpon you, with his forces,

The Gentleman, that was the Canter. SHV. Hence.

FIT. Away. CYM. What is he? ALM. Stay not to ask questions.

FIT. Hee’s a flame. SHV. A fornace. ALM. A consumption,

Kills where hee goes. LIC. See! the whole Couy is scattr’d,

‘Ware, ‘ware the Hawke. I loue to see him flye. (5.5.51-57)

Moreover, where the jeerers satiric jabs fail to reform any of Pennyboy Sr.’s vices, though they may expose them to ridicule, the Canter’s authoritative instruction eventually results in the old miser’ repentance. Revealing himself to Pennyboy Sr. as Frank Pennyboy, his brother still alive and “sent hither to restore your wits,” the former Canter
cures his money-hoarding brother with the moral of the golden mean (5.6.13). He instructs him in the right use of money:

Nay, Pecunia her selfe,
Is come to free him fairely, and discharge
All ties, but those of Loue, vnto her person,
To vse her like a friend, not like a slaue,
Or like an Idoll. Superstition
Doth violate the Deity it worships:
No lesse then scorne doth. And beleue it, brother,
The vse of things is all, and not the Store;
Surfet, and fulnesse, haue kill’d more then famine. (5.6.19-27)

As several other critics have noted, the jeerers, on the whole, play a relatively minor role in *The Staple of News*, a uniquely small role for humors characters in Jonsonian comedy. Lanier, for example, sees a notable diminution of the humors characters in this comedy: “Unlike the supporting characters of Jonson’s earlier comedies, those of *Staple* are not clearly differentiated by their humors or their use of language. The jeerers, for example, act as a group rather than as individuals and are distinguished not by quirks of character but only by their occupations” (255). Herford and Simpson’s introduction to the play notes the same:

Many of the old “Humour” types may be recognized in this sorry crew – the Court-politician, the astrologer, the military poltroon, the affected rhymester, but the colours are palpably faded; Madrigal is not to be compared with Master Matthew, Fitton with Sir Politick, far less Shunfield
with Bobadill, while the “Jeerers” and the “noble whimsy” of the “Canter College”, vivaciously enough described, cannot be compared for *vis comica* with [Jonson’s] earlier picture of the Lady Collegiates in *Epicoene*. (2.185)

The reduction in the vivid depiction of the vices of the humors characters in *The Staple of News*, the means by which Jonson normally accomplishes his moral satire, is balanced by the increased attention given in the play to the Canter, who, when he discloses himself as the not-quite-dead Frank Pennyboy, is revealed to be not only the rightful patrilineal possessor of Pecunia’s fortune, but also the only character with the virtue to merit it. He is the only character in the play who neither pursues Pecunia by unscrupulous means nor, once in possession of her, misuses her by either prodigally casting her about too freely or hoarding her under lock and key. Moreover, as his satiric critiques of the other characters’ vicious attitudes towards money show, he values merit and the cultivation of inner virtues more highly than wealth or appearance, and in this regard he is a unique exception to the society driven by money that Pennyboy Sr. describes in his conversation with the jeerers.

To be sure, the Canter’s satiric voice is the moral center of the play, as is even noted by the on-stage gossips who provide comically unreliable critique of the play during the Intermeans. In the fourth Intermean, Mirth and Tattle notice the kinship between Pennyboy Canter and the voice of the poet:

MIRT. A beggarly Iacke it [the Canter] is, I warrant him, and a kin to the Poet.
TAT. Like enough, for hee had the chiepest part in his play, if you marke it. (4-7)

Critics of the play also note the extent to which the Canter seems to speak for the poet. Kifer argues, “The Canter is an articulate plain-speaking advocate of traditional morality and moderation” (332). Herford and Simpson, citing the instance where the Canter exposes the fraud of the jeerers, remark, “In such passages the rude vehemence of the Jonsonian scorn rises into poetry, and the old Canter, in his beggar’s rags, becomes the prophet, as Jonson himself in his best hours had always been, of an ideal order founded upon measure and upon truth” (2.185-86). The Canter, thus, both preaches and models the play’s moral dictum of the *aurea mediocritas*.

The preaching and the modeling of the play’s moral message, that of the golden mean, is a new development in the characterization of the Jonsonian clever servant, as is the elevation to wealth and status, which Pennyboy Canter accomplishes when he reassumes his estate at the end of Act Four. Of course, as noted above, it could be objected that the Canter is not a servant, properly speaking, but until he reveals himself as the Pennyboy patriarch at the end of the fourth act, this is the position he occupies in the play. At the least, the other characters in the play take him to be Pennyboy Jr.’s servant; so it is, for example, reported at the Staple in the news of the young heir coming into his majority (1.5.90-91). I have mentioned that for much of the play, the relationship between Pennyboy Canter and Pennyboy Jr. is something like the relationship between Wasp and Bartholomew Cokes in *Bartholomew Fair*, with the exception that in *The Staple of News*, the moral instruction of the Canter takes effect on Pennyboy Jr. The repentance of the prodigal is shown clearly in mirroring scenes that frame the allegory in
the first and last act of the play. In the first act, the lawyer Picklock visits the new heir to report the terms of his “deceased” father’s will. He finds the young man, not in mourning weeds, but the dandified wardrobe alluded to above. Pennyboy Jr. rejoices in his father’s passing as it has made him rich:

I must needes say,

I lost an Officer of him, a good Bayliffe,

And I shall want him; but all peace be with him,

I will not wish him aliue, againe; not I,

For all my Fortune. (1.6.19-23)

In the final act, after Pennyboy Canter has resumed his fortune and left his son destitute, the penitent Pennyboy Jr. is again visited by Picklock, who has a scheme to legally wrest the inheritance from the father for the son, as he tells him. This time, however, Pennyboy Jr. forestalls the lawyer’s scheme by stealing the deed of trust that Picklock plans to conceal and restoring it to his father, for which deed he is reconciled and restored to his beloved Pecunia at the play’s end, signaling that his inheritance is assured. Thus, the Canter, unlike Wasp, effects the repentance of his charge, as he had of his brother, the miser Pennyboy Sr.

The character of the Canter is indeed a new adjustment to the Jonsonian comic paradigm. He occupies the exposing and deflating role of the satiric servant, critiquing the vices of the play’s fools and engineering their downfalls, but his satiric voice has an effective and moralizing authority that previous Jonsonian servant characters’ do not; his works repentance in his hearers. Moreover, he, himself, models the virtue that he preaches, and finally, he is rewarded for his virtue by achieving the level of wealth and
rank that his merit would deserve in the patronage system of an ideal court. The situations of servant characters in Jonson’s next two comedies, *The New Inn* and *The Magnetic Lady*, take this development of the servant character even further.

II

The Oxford editors’ introduction to *The New Inn* laments that the play continues what it sees as a regressive decline in the vivid characterization with which Jonson normally draws his humors characters. Herford and Simpson write,

The “Humour” vein, whose first sprightly runnings had created the excellent comedy of thirty years before, now dribbles wearily out in poor travesties of the well-known types, or unsuccessful crosses and variations of them. The military braggart, the astute serving-man, are recognizable still in Sir Glorious Tipto and Ferret – shadowy kinsmen of Bobadill and Brainworm. Pierce and Jordan, inn servants and members of the militia, talk tap-room and barrack-room phrases intermixed without attaining genuine vitality in either capacity; and Fly, a more ambitiously designed amalgam of the scholar, gipsy, and parasite, remains a recipe or specification for a character less human than the worst Elizabethan clown’s journeyman-like imitation of humanity. (2.193)

The original audience must have shared something of Herford and Simpson’s estimation of the quality of the humors comedy in this play when they hissed it from the stage in 1629. The Oxford editors are slightly more charitable than the original audience, however, as they note that “the play is far from being all on this level” of humors comedy (2.193). Their introduction goes on to note that the play is more of a “romance” than a
humors comedy (2.194). Anne Barton agrees with their assessment. It is primarily this comedy upon which she bases her argument that Jonson’s late comedies are Shakespearean. She says of The New Inn, “It is a kind of story wholly alien to the Jacobean Jonson, however familiar from The Comedy of Errors, Twelfth Night, Cymbeline or The Winter’s Tale” (259).

With regards to its social satire, however, the play may not be as “alien” to Jacobean Jonson as Barton describes it, for while The New Inn contains in its romantic comedy plot the kinds of typical Shakespearean sudden recognitions and other unrealistic devices that previous Jonsonian comedies eschews, it also features an interrogation of the validity of Stuart granting of titles that figures prominently in Jonson’s middle comedies. Also, like The Staple of News, The New Inn contains a didactic construction of a meritocratic society that rewards virtues with honors in the microcosmic Court of Love that is erected in the inn. As such, the idealized court of The Light Heart is a morally corrective foil for the commercialized patronage that was practiced in the actual Caroline court.

Sheila Walsh argues for the relevance of the “degeneration of heraldic practice” that accompanied the commercialization and consequent waning legitimacy of the gentry class in Stuart England to a reading of The New Inn (232). She cites as an analog for the day’s sports at the inn the practice of heraldic visitations in Caroline England. These, as Walsh explains, were visits by an official herald to a gentleman’s house, wherein the herald was to verify the armigerous claims of the resident. As she notes, however, like seemingly everything else involved with Stuart patronage, the heralds’ visitations were subject to corruption. Walsh notes that the “proof” of arms that the heralds discovered
was often less than genuine; she quotes at length from Sir John Doderidge’s *The Magazine of Honour* on the subject of these heraldic visitations:

> if need be, a King of Heralds shall give [a gentleman] for money armes newly made, and invented with the Crest and all: the title whereof shall pretend to have bin found by the said Herauld, in the perusing and viewing of old Registers, where his ancestors in time past had been recorded to bear the same; or if he will doe it more truly, and of better faith, hee will write, that for the merits of, and certain qualities that he doth see in him, and for sundry noble acts which he hath performed, hee by the authority which he hath, as King of Heralds in his province, and of armes, giveth unto him and his heirs, these and these heroicall bearings in arms. (qtd in Walsh 244)

Walsh describes the problem that this heraldic practice of either “pretending” to find proof of gentle blood in the “old Registers” or inventing “sundry noble acts” in return for money – likely a bribe – created for determining the legitimacy of a claim to gentility:

> What this passage tells us is that the very practice involved in ascertaining gentility, the reciprocal relationship between the smothering of wealth and the payment for coats of arms – the payment rendered for respectability – is at odds with the very money that makes it possible. Certainly Jacobean audiences would have been familiar with the degeneration of the practice of determining gentility and valor into a process involving the exchange of money for questionable proof. (244)
Anne Barton also notes the importance of the declining nature of English nobility as a result of the commercialization of patronage to a reading of *The New Inn*. She describes the conception of the Stuart court in the 1620s that informs this play as follows:

The world has changed. The court is no longer, as it was in Elizabeth’s reign, a fountainhead of virtuous education whose currents circulate through every aristocratic household. Nor, since King James took to improving his finances by the indiscriminate sale of titles, is the nobility what it was. (261)

Jonsonian comedy, as this study has shown throughout, is consistently critical of and contemptuous towards those who receive their titles either through or because of their wealth. One only need remember the fool Sogliardo or the witless Fitzdotterel for an idea of the disdain with which Jonson viewed those who had purchased their social rank. *The New Inn* registers the typical indictment of the commercialization of patronage in the comments of Host Goodstock, noted in the opening of this chapter, when he nostalgically remembers the old court in the days when “only virtue made it, not the mercate, / That titles were not vented at the drum” (1.3.53-54).

Contrary to the forged proofs of gentility that were apparently too often the result of typical Stuart heraldic visitations, the proofs of gentility that are confirmed by the ceremonial events in *The New Inn* are based upon what Jonson consistently views as the most certain and just foundations of social rank: merit and virtue. Martin Butler argues that the play’s test of true nobility in the Court of Love and the conversations on love and valor offer an alternative, following the death of Buckingham, to the commercialization
of patronage that had dominated the Stuart court, really, since the early years of James. Butler writes,

*The New Inn* could be said to be engaged in the act of reconstructing an aristocratic ideology after the removal of Buckingham, but that it is doing so by conciliation, not confrontation: the reform proposed involves a reconstruction of the courtly ethos from within, not a destruction from without. Indeed, despite being a sensational flop at the Blackfriars, the play reads like a seminal text for the court culture of the next generation.

(175)

The ascendant “court culture” that *The New Inn* proposes is a social hierarchy based on merit: a meritocracy. The culture is no less stratified for all that it is based on merit, but virtue is the basis for rank in the society of The Light Heart, even more so than blood, certainly more so than wealth.

The location of The Light Heart, in Barnet, outside of London is important as a setting for this new court. Walsh argues that the liminal space of the play’s setting is important for its functioning as a revisionary alternative to the degenerate court at London. She argues, “Notwithstanding its Argument and epilogue, the play is what I would call wholly liminal; it takes place, like *The Tempest*, in a world that occupies the entire spatiotemporal world of the play but which is clearly someplace else for most of its inhabitants; it edges out other dramatic worlds” (234). In Walsh’s reading, though, the setting of the play’s action, which deals so explicitly with questions of true nobility, within the confines of an inn, as opposed to a church or manor, signals the further degeneration of the titled classes into commercial venture. Pointing out that the
movement of ceremonial activity from the church to the inn in the play reflects the actual practice of heraldic investigations in contemporary England, she argues that “the heraldic visitations fall into the range of ritual activities that may have moved from the manors and churches to the inns themselves, which locates them as degenerating practices at the heart of this overall social movement,” which she characterizes as “the slippage of communal practice into commercial space” (237).

Glenn J. Clark also emphasizes the importance of the inn as a space for the performance of the day’s events, but in his reading, the movement from the church to the inn signals not so much commercialized degeneration as a move to a locale that is characterized by social license. Clark builds his analysis of inn space on Lord Beaufort’s justification of his secret marriage to Laetitia in Act Five, wherein he says that he has not wronged Lady Frampul in the secret nuptials because they were held, not at her estate, but at an inn, where there is “licence / Of all community” (5.4.7-8). The license of the inn setting, according to Clark, provides what might be characterized by an equally liminal environment, but one which frees the society of The Light Heart from the social hierarchy of the everyday world and, thus, frees them to establish their own, more egalitarian social structure based on merit. Clark argues, “For Jonson, the imaginative social licence of the inn enables what may well have been a personally satisfying fusion of aristocratic romance with a humanist and civil ideology of social reform and meritocratic inclusiveness” (38). The inclusiveness in the society of The Light Heart is demonstrated, as Clark notes, by the extremely permeable boundary between the upstairs and the downstairs societies of the inn. He points out that the servants engage with the aristocrats in “civil conversation” and suggests that this conversation is important for
erasing what the play codes as artificial status barriers: “The servants’ participation in
the upstairs celebration reflects a humanist and meritocratic ethic in which internal values
outweigh ascribed status” (38).

Clark is certainly correct in noting the crossing of the boundary between the
upstairs and the downstairs worlds in *The New Inn*, but his essay perhaps obscures the
extent to which the play uses the designations of upstairs and downstairs to separate and
stratify the society of The Light Heart. The boundary is surely crossed – in both
directions, it should be noted – but it remains a boundary, separating the *noble* – and here
I mean the term as denoting character, not necessarily ascribed rank\(^{19}\) – upstairs world
from the degenerate downstairs society. In the world of *The New Inn*, however, the
boundary between the upstairs and downstairs society is defined, not by ascribed rank,
but by merit.

That the society of The Light Heart is organized according to merit rather than
ascribed rank is shown by how it assigns characters to either the upstairs or the
downstairs world. The most outstanding example of this meritocracy is the elevation of
Prudence, the chambermaid to Lady Frampul, first to the office of Queen of the Day’s
Sports, and finally to the actual aristocracy by virtue of her marriage to Lord Latimer. I
will take up the issue of Pru’s elevation below in more detail, but first I want to examine
the way that the meritocratic hierarchy is illustrated in the demotion to the downstairs
world of one of the members of the ranking members of the play’s nobility, the knight Sir
Glorious Tiptoe.

The Persons of the Play describes Tiptoe as, “A Knight, and Colonell, hath the
luck to thinke well of himselfe, without a riuall, talkes gloriously of any thing, but very
seldom is in the right” (46-49). Tiptoe is, of course, another of Jonson’s braggart soldiers, drawn along the lines of Captains Bobadil and Shift. Tiptoe, however, differs in that, rather than being a hypocritical, cadging parasite, he is an overbearing man of rank. The difference in characterization reflects the difference in social problems posed by the English soldiery between the 1590s and the late 1620s. Late in Elizabeth’s reign, as the first chapter of this study notes, a vagrant soldiery, left homeless after service in the wars with Spain, was a social problem in London; in the early years of Charles’s reign, his practice of billeting soldiers in private homes along the south coast of England as a way to save on military expenses once again made the English soldiery a social nuisance, but of a different kind. This difference is reflected in the official rank and in the overbearing demeanor of Tiptoe. Most important for The New Inn’s moral satire, though, are not Tiptoe’s differences from braggarts like Bobadil, but his similarities thereto, notably his overweening pride and hypocrisy, his concern with appearances, and his base cowardice.

Tiptoe’s pride and his concern with external appearance and authority are intimately tied together. He demonstrates this in his first appearance on stage when he criticizes the Host at their introduction for not dressing appropriately to his position. Seeing the Host dressed simply, in a velvet cap and without a stately cloak, Tiptoe is incredulous. He dubiously asks whether Goodstock can really be the host, and their subsequent conversation shows his disapproval with the host’s appearance:

Tip. [This is the] Host reall o’the house? and Cap of Maintenance?

Host. The Lord o’the light Heart, Sir, Cap a pie;

Whereof the Fether is the Embleme, Colonel,

Put vp, with the Ace of Hearts! Tip. But why in Cuerpo?
I hate to see an host, and old, in Cuerpo.


The horse boyes garbe! poore blank, and halfe blank Cuerpo,

They relish not the grauity of an host,

Who should be King at Armes, and ceremonies,

In his owne house!  know all, to the gold weights.  (2.5.45-54)

Tiptoe can’t assimilate what he sees as the contradiction between the Host’s rank and his garb.  The irony that readers of the play know, of course, is that Tiptoe’s judgment is even worse than it appears:  his failure to identify the respect due to Goodstock’s character as a benevolent host, is actually a far lesser error in judgment than his failure to recognize the respect that the Host’s true identity should command as the lost Lord Frampul.

Tiptoe’s lack of judgment, which is based solely on Goodstock’s appearance, can be contrasted with the virtuous gallant Lovel’s estimation of the Host’s character, which is based, more reliably, on his conversation.  While Tiptoe expresses surprise that someone dressed as lowly as Goodstock has attained a rank as high as a host, Lovel, on the contrary, expresses a measure of surprise that someone who speaks as well as Goodstock occupies a position as low as host of an inn:

Lou.  Yo’are tart, mine host, and talke aboue your seasoning,

Ore what you seeme:  it should not come, me thinkes,

Vnder your cap, this veine of salt, and sharpnesse!

These strikings vpon learning, now and then?

How long haue you, (if your dul ghest may aske it,)
Droue this quick trade, of keeping the light-heart,

Your Mansion, Palace here, or Hostelry? (1.3.89-95)

Lovel’s playful naming of the inn as a “mansion” or “palace” foreshadows the revelation of the Host as a nobleman later in the play. As their conversation continues, the Host admits his birth is somewhat above his station and gives his assumed name, Goodstock, a name which also foreshadows his true nature. Lovel recognizes immediately the appropriateness of the Host’s name: “Sir, and you confesse it [his name], / Both i’your language, treaty, and your bearing” (1.3.98-99).

Lovel’s judgment of the host is based on merit that he perceives in his character, and he judges by the wisdom and education latent in the Host’s conversation. Tiptoe can see no further than the Host’s clothes, and as has become crystal clear by this point, the equation of virtue with sartorial appearance in Jonsonian comedy is always coded as vicious. Having already doubted the veracity of the Host’s position from his appearance, Tiptoe adds to his sin, proclaiming what he would do if he were the host:

I would not speake vnto a Cooke of quality,

Your Lordships footman, or my Ladies Trundle,

In Cuerpo! If a Dog but stayd below

That were a dog of fashion, and well nos’d,

And could present himselfe; I would put on

The Savoy chaine about my neck; the ruffe;

And cuffes of Flanders; then the Naples hat;

With the Rome hatband; and the Florentine Agate;

The Milan sword; the cloake of Genoa; set
With Brabant buttons; all my giuen pieces:

Except my gloues, the natiuues of Madrid,

To entertaine him in! and complement

With a tame cony, as with a Prince that sent it. (2.5.57-69)

Tiptoe’s idea of a nobility is based entirely on appearances; his is what might be called an aristocracy of clothes. Julie Sanders analyzes the above speech, wherein Tiptoe anatomizes the latest European fashion in his fantasy of how he would dress himself for the entertainment of even a prince’s dog:

Tipto wants to present himself here as one who would talk to a “downstairs” type or a messenger from a prince so long as he is well-dressed. But in typical Tipto fashion, in the process he reveals himself as being the biggest snob of all in that he will not deign to talk to someone whose clothes are not “in vogue”. *The New Inn* is a play that persistently investigates notions of meritocracy: Tipto’s entirely materialistic version is satirized mercilessly. (¶ 16)

The aristocracy of clothes is also indicted as bogus later in the play by the hubbub surrounding the arrival of the tailor Nick Stuffe and his wife Pinnacia. The tailor has dressed his wife in the extravagant gold dress that Lady Frampul has commissioned for Prudence to wear in presiding over the day’s sports and has brought her to the inn to engage in a perverse sexual habit of his, wherein he fantasizes he is a footman making love to his mistress (4.3.63-74). The exposure of the Stuffes hilariously gives the lie to the assumption held by Tiptoe and other court fops that the clothes make the man – or the woman, as the case may be.
Tiptoe’s judgment is further satirized when he advocates for the parasite Fly as a sort of official scholar to Prudence’s court. Tiptoe’s high estimation of Fly, as his low estimation of Host Goodstock, seems to be based on little more than appearance. He calls him, “Doctor,” and asks to hear his “lecture, / Unto the family,” proclaiming, “I’le heare thee, and ha’ thee a Doctour, / Thou shalt be one, thou hast a Doctors looke!” [emphasis added] (2.5.6-8). Making a quick summary judgment based on this “Doctors looke,” some of Fly’s incorrect Latin, and the parasite’s habit of agreeing with Tiptoe’s dogma on the art of fencing, the Colonel decides that he is a scholar and that his lecture must be read at the Court. As the Host discerns, Tiptoe’s commendation is more a comment on the Colonel’s high opinion of himself than it is anything to do with Fly; when Latimer remarks upon the fervency of Tiptoe’s suit for Fly, saying, “How he commends him!” the Host replies, astutely, “As, to saue himselfe in him” (2.6.61). Prudence, queen of the day’s sports, will have none of Tiptoe’s self-aggrandizing suit, however, and threatens to banish him, with his Fly, to the downstairs: “Leaue your Aduocate-ship,” she warns, “Except that we shall call you Orator Flie, / And send you down to the dresser, and the dishes” (2.6.78-80). Unable to brook criticism, Tiptoe leaves the society of upstairs and descends with Fly to the downstairs, where he establishes his “militia” of inn servants.

If the upstairs world at The Light Heart is characterized by a meritocracy of civil conversation and virtue, the downstairs world is its moral opposite, characterized by a disorder bordering at times on criminality. It is the disorder of the downstairs of the inn that makes Tiptoe’s military organization of that society comically absurd. The epitome of the downstairs drunkenness and disorderliness is the hostler, Peck, who rehearses his
myriad of devices to cheat the inn’s guests by underfeeding their horses. He describes his profession as a “kind of mystery, that corrupts / Our standing manners quickly” (3.1.81-82). The other servants downstairs join Peck in reciting his litany of cheats, implicitly helping him to perfect his art of cozening. Fly even speaks of the justice of Peck’s cheating methods, arguing that the hostler gets even with certain types of persons, such as traveling parsons, who deserve to be cheated. He calls it, “an office meritorious, / To tith such [parsons] soundly” (3.1.149-50).

As the downstairs scene progresses, the symposium on cheating guests of the inn eventually gives way to general drunken disorder. Trundle, Lady Frampul’s coachman, is described at the end of this downstairs scene as being “drunke as a fish now, and almost as dead” (3.1.210) Ferret, Lovel’s serving man, is, in fact ejected from the downstairs society near the scene’s end because he makes it his business, “To be sober” (3.1.204). When the rowdy gamesters Bat Burst and Hodge Huffle arrive to join the drinking, the disorder nearly turns to riot as Huffle and Tiptoe quarrel over their opinions of the Spanish. Peace is regained only for a moment when the Stuffes arrive, before Tiptoe and Huffle resume their quarrel, over Pinnacia this time, and the disorder dissolves into an out and out fracas.

Though the majority of this downstairs hubbub occurs offstage, in the ensuing scene, Lords Latimer and Beaufort and Lady Frampul describe the atrocity of the event:

[Lat.] What more then Thracian Barbarisme was this!

Bea. The battayle o’ the Centaures, with the Lapithes!

Lad. There is no taming o’ the Monster drinke. (4.3.1-3)
The offstage disturbance serves as a means of differentiating the meritorious upstairs society from the base downstairs. The focus of the contrast, as in their estimations of the Host, is between the virtuous Lovel and the vicious Tiptoe. The aforementioned Lords and Lady, along with Prudence, relate the cowardice and ineptitude of Tiptoe and the other ruffians as well as the martial skill of Lovel:

_Lat._ But what a glorious beast our Tipto shew’d!

He would not discompose himselfe, the Don!

Your Spaniard, nere, doth discompose himself.

_Bea._ Yet, how he talk’t, and ror’d i’ the beginning!

_Pru._ And ran as fast, as a knock’d Marro’bone.

_Bea._ So they did all at last, when Lovel went downe,

And chas’d ‘hem ‘bout the Court. (4.3.4-10)

The cowardice of the downstairs society, for all of their bluster in the preceding scene, is exposed as empty hypocrisy in the face of the real valor and skill of Lovel.

As Bobadil had the lame excuse of Justice Clement’s warrant for not defending himself against Downright, so Tiptoe pleads that a Spaniard never discomposes himself. In both cases, the affected valor of the bragging soldiers is exposed as fraud. Lovel’s valor, on the other hand is real. His bravery and skill with the sword are lauded by Lady Frampul, who, as Latimer notices, begins to appear quite taken with the gallant who has silently pined for her. She raves,

_I nere saw_

A lightning shoot so, as my seruant did,

_His rapier was a Meteor, and he wau’d it_
Ouer ‘hem, like a Comet! as they fled him!

I mark’d his manhood! euery stoope he made

Was like an Eagles, at a flight of Cranes! (4.3.11-16)

Lovel’s superior merit in martial matters is shown here, though Tiptoe outranks him both militarily and socially: Lovel is only a gentleman, Tiptoe a knight. While Tiptoe’s lack of virtues sees him banished to the base society below the stairs, however, Lovel’s virtues raise him to the very apex of the upstairs society of The Light Heart.

Lovel, along with the Host and Prudence, is depicted as a character of ideal virtue. In keeping with the nostalgic nature of the play, he is characterized as a gentleman of a bygone and more honorable era. He was brought up as a page to the Old Lord Beaufort in a court where the flowers of ideal nobility were still fresh in bloom. Or this, at least, is how he pictures it. He describes the life of a court page as an institution, from our Ancestors,

Hath beene deriu’d down to vs, and receiu’d

In a succession, for the noblest way

Of breeding vp our youth, in letters, armes,

Faire meine, discourses, ciuill exercise,

And all the blazon of a Gentleman?

Where can [one] learne to vault, to ride, to fence,

To moue his body gracefuller? to speake

His language purer? or to tune his minde,

Or manners, more to the harmony of Nature

Then, in these nourceries of nobility? (1.3.41-51)
Lovel’s picture of the court life is, of course, debunked by the Host in the lines quoted above, which argue that the commercialization of place at court has ruined it as a place of virtue. Lovel, however, is something of a throwback. Though not ascribed the status of a knight, he embodies the feudal knightly ideal. He is discerning, as shown in his correct judgment of the Host; skilled in martial valor, as shown in his besting of the downstairs crew; and civil in discourse, as evidenced in his speech on the qualities of being a court page. Lovel has so much of the medieval knightly ethos that he even melancholically and silently pines away in unrequited love for the Lady Frampul out of a perceived obligation to Lord Beaufort, a rival and the son of his old master (1.6.118ff).

In the course of the play, it is Lovel’s unrequited love for Lady Frampul that provides him with the opportunities to reveal his noble virtues and then to be rewarded with the wealth and position that his virtues merit, for Prudence, The New Inn’s clever servant character, knowing of Lovel’s love for her mistress and of his merit, uses her position as queen of the day’s events to engineer a plan whereby Lovel may win the love of her mistress. Prudence proclaims a court of love, in which Lady Frampul must entertain Lovel solely in conversation for a pair of hours “with all respects, / And valuation of a principall servant” and “all the priuiledges, / The freedoms, fauours, rights, she can bestow” (2.6.160-63). The “argument” of Lovel’s conversation is to be only of love, “And the companion of it, gentile courtship” (2.6.169-70). It is by his discourse in these conversations that Lovel’s courtly virtues are primarily on display.

Lovel’s discourse emphasizes love’s Platonic and spiritual aspects as opposed to the material and physical. In this regard it reflects the contemporary strain of Caroline Neo-Platonic rhetoric of love made popular in Henrietta Maria’s salons and at court.
Critics of this play have noted the decidedly purifying tendency in Caroline Neo-Platonism and in its reflection in *The New Inn*. Barton notes that Henrietta Maria’s “Neo-Platonism was really an attempt to reform the sexual licence of the court according to the model provided by the royal marriage” (264). Herford and Simpson assert that the Caroline fashion of Platonic love “was one of the symptoms of that reaction against the hearty, gross-living Renascence which fills the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries” (197). Helen Ostovich draws a comparison between Charles and Henrietta Maria and Lovel and Lady Frampul: “both the royal couple and Jonson’s characters endorse the platonic ideal of love as a spiritual bond that purifies sexual passion” (7).

The purity of love is its essence as Lovel’s speeches characterize it: “True loue hath no vnworthy thought, no light, / Loose, vn-bec oming appetite, or straine, / But fixed, constant, pure, immutable” (3.2.122-24). His idealized version of love, like his idealized version of the noble court, is set against the degeneracy of the actual court, in this instance represented by the young Lord Beaufort’s suggestive advances to the “lady” Laetitia. Repeatedly in his speeches, Lovel stresses the importance of the metaphysical qualities of love that have to do with the union of souls, and nearly as often, Beaufort responds to his ideal definitions in asides with contentions for the physical delights of love, as in the following exchange:

*Lov.* My end is lost in louing of a face,
An eye, lip, nose, hand, foot, or other part,
Whose all is but a statue, if the mind
Moue not, which only can make the returne.
The end of loue is, to haue two made one
In will, and in affection, that the mindes
Be first inoculated, not the bodies.

Bea. Gi’ me the body, if it be a good one. (3.2.148-55)

Beaufort’s sensual lines, likely delivered while he is demonstrating the pleasures of which he speaks with Laetitia, have the same deflating tone that is utilized by many of Jonson’s prior satirists, like Buffone, when they are exposing to ridicule the affected poses of humors characters. Here, however, the satiric power of Beaufort’s aside is deeply compromised, if not obliterated, by the fact that the audience thinks that the “body” he refers at that moment is the body of a boy: the son of the Host, Francis Goodstock, who is disguised as Lady Frampul’s sister, Laetitia. Francis will, of course, turn out to be Laetitia in truth, but not until in the play’s final act, after Beaufort has been humiliated. In any event, Lovel has the last word on the matter:

And Loue is neuer true, that is not lasting,
Nor more then any can be pure, or perfect,
That entertaines more than one obiect. (3.2.198-200)

Lovel’s idea of love is characterized as more virtuous – and more meritorious – than the physical and bawdy version of Beaufort. Beaufort’s materialist love becomes the humorous object of satire when, prior to Laetitia’s revelation of her true identity, he is momentarily led to believe that he has married a boy. Lovel’s first hour’s discourse thus confirms him as a meritorious courtier with regards to his behavior in the art of love. His valor, which is shown in practice in the subsequent scene by his martial dispersal of the below-stairs fracas, is also evidenced by his conversation in his second speech after Lady
Frampul successfully petitions the court to hear Lovel discourse on valor instead of love, arguing that “true valor . . . oft begets true loue” (4.4.27-28).

Lovel’s discourse of valor preaches a stoic ideal that subdues the martial to the rational and excludes revenge and matters of personal reputation, as well as courage brought on by drinking. Lovel defines true valor as follows:

It is the greatest vertue, and the safety
Of all mankinde, the obiect of it is danger.
A certaine meane ‘twixt feare, and confidence:
No inconsiderate rashnesse, or vaine appetite
Of false encountering formidable things;
But a true science of distinguishing
What’s good or euill. It springs out of reason,
And tends to perfect honesty, the scope
Is always honour, and the publique good:
It is no valour for a priuate cause. (4.4.38-47)

His debate with Latimer and Beaufort on the subject exposes the false valor of anger, when Lovel asserts that passion “is not valour. / I neuer though an angry person valiant: / Vertue is neuer ayded by a vice” (4.4.63-65). It also exposes the false assumption that redress of insults is valorous, asserting rather the stoic response that nobody can be hurt in reality by another’s affronts. Lovel asks of those who would redress offenses,

How most ridiculous quarrels are all these?
Notes of a queasie, and sick stomach, labouring
With want of a true injury! the maine part
Though Lovel is shown to be not quite able to live up to his own stoic ideals when, following the close of the court of love, he feels he has been had by Lady Frampul and Prudence, the moral integrity of his discourse establishes him as a paragon of valor. The merit of his discourse is testified to by all those present at the end of his conversation when they enthusiastically voice their approval:

_Lat._ Excellent! _Bea._ Truth, and right! _Fra._ An Oracle

Could not haue spoken more! _Lad._ Been more beleeu’d!

_Pru._ The whole Court runnes into your sentence, Sir! (4.4.222-24)

On the whole, Lovel is depicted as the consummate courtier. He is virtuous, well spoken, discerning, educated, skilled and morally upright in valor, and pure in love. His display of these qualities during the course of the day’s sports earns him the affection of his beloved Lady Frampul, as well as the approval of her disguised father, and at the close of the play, his virtues are rewarded with a fortuitous marriage. Thus, by means of his virtue, he ascends to the wealth and power of the aristocracy. Such a movement, typical of the meritocracy of _The Light Heart_, acts as an instructive dramatic exemplum to Caroline court society. Yet Lovel’s ascension is not the most striking instance of advancement as a reward for merit pictured in _The New Inn_. That distinction, hands down, goes to Lady Frampul’s chambermaid, Prudence, who vaults all the way from the rank of servant, near the bottom of the social scale of ascribed rank, to that of Lady, a ranking gentlewoman, an advancement only possible in the meritocracy of _The New Inn_.

Prudence is unique among Jonsonian clever servants in many ways, her gender being only the most obvious. Like Jonson’s other servants, she is primarily responsible
for engineering the play’s comic action; the Court of Love that is the centerpiece of the
day’s sports is her brainchild, as is the plan to disguise the “boy” Francis as Lady
Frampul’s sister, Laetitia, a scheme that eventually humiliates Beaufort for his lust, as
noted above. Pru, like other clever servants, is free in dispensing her voice of satiric
correction, as when she censures Lady Frampul for the indecorous appearance of her
being alone at a Barnet inn with a bevy of male suitors. Lady Frampul’s response to Pru
after she backs off from her censure, asking her lady’s pardon for overstepping her
bounds, seems to indicate that such correction from the chambermaid is not an irregular
occurrence:

Pru. Your Ladyship will pardon me, my fault:
If I haue ouer-shot, I’le shoote no more.

Lad. Yes shoot againe, good Pru, Ile ha’ thee shoot,
And aime, and hit: I know ‘tis loue in thee,
And so I doe interpret it. (2.1.61-65)

Helen Ostovich argues that this type of openness of conversation between the lady and
her chambermaid is a necessary component of their relationship. “The maintenance of
their friendship,” she writes, “relies upon freedom of speech, which both creates and
modifies their individual identities” (4).²² Prudence’s voice of correction has targets
beyond her mistress, though. As Clark argues, “Pru’s self-confident authority, like that
of Host Goodstock, allows her to correct boldly the errors of her social superiors” (42).

It is really the voice of instructive authority that Prudence speaks with in this play,
like the didactic satire of the Canter in The Staple of News, sets her apart from Jonson’s
earlier clever servant characters. Much of the authority accorded to Pru in The New Inn
is, of course, a direct result of her being named the “Queen Regent” of the day’s sports by agreement of the play’s gentility, but she carries out the role so fittingly that the characters universally acknowledge her authority as being more the result of her prudent wisdom and intellect than it is of simply her being assigned the position (2.6.1).

Even before she is installed as the Queen Regent, for instance, she wields an air of authority and erudition that the other characters recognize by its own force. For instance, when she first appears on stage, looking for Lovel, and the Host attempts to forestall her so that the melancholy gallant can escape detection by the party of Lady Frampul, she deftly turns him aside with polite efficiency that leaves the host with nothing to say but acknowledge the efficacy of her speech:

[Host.] Faire Lady, welcome, as your host can make you.

Pru. Forbeare, Sir, I am first to haue mine audience,
Before the complement. This gentleman
Is my addresse to. Host. And it is in state. (1.6.28-31)

Prudence’s speech is not the lowbrow talk of a typical chambermaid, as her subsequent formal address to Lovel demonstrates. She speaks in the elevated language of the court, betraying an education that, as Ostovich points out, may have been received alongside Lady Frampul (“Mistress and Maid” 10).

Pru’s authority over the court at The Light Heart is established at her first entry in her regal garb. Lord Beaufort, lusty and always one to judge by the senses, attempts to crack an ironic joke while, apparently, attempting to lewdly fondle the dressed-up chambermaid. Prudence quickly reproves him, however, and then proceeds to reprimand the Host for his coarse joke in her presence.
Bea. [accosting her] Translated Prudence! Pru. Sweet my Lord, hand off;
It is not now, as when plaine Prudence liu’d,
And reach’d her Ladiship – Host. The Chamber-pot.
Pru. The looking-glass, mine Host, loose your house Metaphore!
You haue a negligent memory, indeed;
Speake the host’s language. Here’s a yong Lord,
Will make ’t a precedent else. (2.6.3-9)
Prudence quickly sets the tone that her rule will be respected, and her authoritative
bearing is noted and approved by the court. Latimer remarks, “Well acted Pru,” and the
Host adds, “First minute of her raigne! what will she doe / Forty yeare hence? God
Blesse her!” (2.6.9-11). The Host’s reference to the forty year reign of Elizabeth might
be seen as a bit of ironic hyperbole, but given the universal approbation that Prudence
receives throughout her reign, it might also be praise given in earnest. Julie Sanders
raises the possibility that the actor playing Prudence may have well been dressed “to
resemble the late queen,” if not, in fact, wearing one of Elizabeth’s old dresses in the
play’s performance (“Wardrobe Stuffe” ¶19).

Whether Prudence is intended to evoke Elizabeth specifically or not, the wit,
authority, and savvy with which she rules the upstairs world for the bulk of the play’s
action certainly resembles the idealized notions that had come to be associated with the
Virgin Queen in Caroline England. She shows good judgment of character when she
banishes the vainglorious Tiptoe to the downstairs with his Fly, wittily punning on the
parasite’s name: “His buz will there become him” (2.6.85). Again, Latimer is quick to
recognize Pru’s intelligence and statecraft: “A faire remoue at once, of two impertinents!
/ Excellent Pru! I loue thee for thy wit, / No lesse then State” (2.6.93-95). Pru’s response both evokes the wit of Elizabeth and gives evidence of an uncanny understanding of competent statesmanship. She responds, “One must preserue the other” (2.6.95).

Pru is, in fact, aware of her formidable wit, and, like Lovel but unlike Tiptoe, she prizes it far above her appearance. She demonstrates this clearly in the last act when she has donned the golden dress originally meant for her to wear because Lady Frampul thinks the dress may help her to coax the spurned Lovel to return to the court from his room. Pru agrees to bring suit to Lovel, but says she will burn the dress before she trusts it against her own wit. She says,

Ile fire the charme first,
I had rather dye in a ditch, with Mistresse Shore,
Without a smock, as the pitifull matter has it,
Then owe my wit to cloathes, or ha’ it beholden.  (5.2.23-26)

Like Lovel, the Host, and, indeed, all of the characters depicted positively in Jonsonian comedy, Prudence cultivates her inner virtues – especially her intellect – rather than place her self assurance in external and material trappings. A typical clever servant, she lives by her wits, and is generally successful. The authority that she is accorded in The New Inn, though, gives her witty satire an instructive quality as well. Like the Canter, her instruction is taken and, ultimately redemptive.

The main recipient of Pru’s instructive criticism in the course of the play is her mistress, Lady Frampul, whom she promises Lovel in the first act to “be bold to hold the glasse vp to her, / To shew her Ladyship where she hath err’d” (1.6.76-77). Principally, of course, Lady Frampul has erred in the matter of not recognizing Lovel’s love for her
and his merit as a suitor, and Prudence undertakes to remedy this error, primarily, by engineering the erection of the Court of Love. Even before establishing the court, though, she begins to direct Lady Frampul in her behavior towards Lovel. When her mistress complains that she does not know how to approach the melancholy Lovel, Pru responds, “I will instruct you, madame, if that be all, / Goe to him and kisse him” (2.6.99-100). Lady Frampul, surprised at the instruction, excepts, but Pru will have none of it:

Lad. How, Pru? Pru. Goe, and kisse him,

I doe command it. Lad. Th’art not wilde, wench! Pru. No,

Tame, and exceeding tame, but still your Sou’raigne. (2.6.100-102)

Prudence continues to run roughshod over Lady Frampul’s objections through the duration of her tenure as queen. Her sharp instruction, coupled with her scheme of giving the floor to Lovel, has its effect though, and Lady Frampul does fall for the virtuous Lovel. Her pride keeps her from revealing it immediately, however. Though she professes love for the gallant, she does it in such hyperbolic language that Prudence thinks she dissembles. Apparently, so does Lovel, because he leaves, professing himself scorned, and retires to his room. This necessitates the request from Lady Frampul that Pru see if she can fetch him back, to which Pru accedes, but not before she scolds her mistress for her overweening pride:

I will tell him [Lovel], as it is, indeed;

I come from the fine, forward, frampull Lady,

One was runne mad with pride, wild with self-loue,

But late encountering a wise man, who scorn’d her,

And knew the way to his owne bed, without
Borrowing her warming-pan, she hath recover’d

Part of her wits: so much as to consider

How farre she hath trespass’d, vpon whom, and how.

And now sits penitent and solitary,

Like the forsaken Turtle, in the volary

Of the light Heart, the cage, she hath abus’d

Mourning her folly, weeping at the height

She measures with her eye, from whence she is falne,

Since she did branch it, on the top o’the wood. (5.2.28-41)

Lady Frampul accepts, and seemingly learns from, her reproof. “I pr’y the Pru,” she says, “abuse me enough, that’s vse me / As thou thinks’st fit, any course way, to humble me, / Or bring me home again” (5.2.42-44). At the play’s end, ultimately as a result of Pru’s engineering of the comic plot and her instructive critique, Lady Frampul is happily matched with Lovel, a match the play characterizes as fortuitous for the both of them.

On the whole, like Lovel and the Host, Prudence is drawn as a wholly virtuous and meritorious character. She possesses a full panoply of Jonsonian virtues: wit, learned conversation, prudent counsel, and a cultivation of inner virtues instead of outer appearances. As noted above, the court of The Light Heart continually praises her qualities and attributes. Even after her tenure of queen is over, for instance, in the scene where she stands on her wit and reproves her mistress’s pride, the Host remarks on her authoritative presence by saying, “Still spirit of Pru!” (5.2.27). At the play’s conclusion, Pru’s merit is rewarded, like Lovel’s, with a virtuous marriage that raises her to a ladyship of her own. That Pru’s advancement is due solely to her merit is emphasized by
the fact that she has neither money, lands, nor blood to commend her. Lovel and the Host attempt to remedy Pru’s state by offering to provide generous dowries for her, but Lord Latimer goes them one better:

    Lat. But I must doe the crowning act of bounty!

    Host. What’s that, my Lord? Lat. Give her my selfe, which here

By all the holy vowes of loue I doe.

Spare all your promis’d portions, she is a dowry

So all-sufficient in her vertue and manners,

That fortune cannot add to her. [emphasis added] (5.5.140-145)

Latimer’s refusal of the dowry money again drives home the point: Prudence is raised for her meritorious virtue, which is nobility enough in the meritocracy of The New Inn.

The advancements of Prudence and Lovel to the aristocracy of the upstairs world and the demotion of Tiptoe to the downstairs illustrate the logic of the social hierarchy of The New Inn. It is a stratified social hierarchy, but that stratification is based upon a system that recognizes merit more than blood and both more than wealth. In this meritocracy wealth is the reward of, rather than the substitute for, merit. Rank and importance are ascribed accordingly, as evidenced most clearly by the elevation of the meritorious clever servant, Prudence. As Julie Sanders notes, “Prudence is never revealed to be anything other than of the servant class and [yet] she is, as her name suggests, in essence, the moral centre of Jonson’s play” (60). Barton argues of Prudence’s promotion, “This is not a matter of social class, but of what people are” (271).

Martin Butler stresses the instructive application to a Caroline court just freed from the patronage hoarding influence of the Duke of Buckingham when he reads The New Inn as
a “fable . . . of an aristocracy re-educated in its moral and social responsibilities and revivified by the recovery of old blood and the promotion of new merit” (173).

Like *The Staple of News, The New Inn*, adds to its satiric critique of contemporary English vice a picture of what a virtuous society might look like. Conspicuously, both meritocratic worlds include the promotion of the virtuous satiric servants to positions of rank befitting their merit. A similar promotion is illustrated in *The Magnetic Lady*, a promotion which is also perhaps something of a final fantasy of the social efficacy of humors comedy.

III

Larry S. Champion’s defense of *The Magnetic Lady* as a serious Jonsonian comedy worthy of study makes the following claim:

Consequently, in a study of Jonson’s comedies *The Magnetic Lady* might well be either a beginning or an end: It is in effect a dramatic portrayal of his *ars poetica*. Moreover, in its sweep of dramatic devices it illustrates a remarkable summation of Jonson’s comic technique. (104)

Champion’s high estimation of the quality of this, possibly the last composed of Jonson’s comedies, is not shared by a great number of Jonson critics, but his reading of this play as a “summation of Jonson’s technique” seems to be at least justified, if not authorized, but the intercalary materials of the play, the running interact conversation between the Boy of the house, Mr. Probee, and Mr. Damplay, in which Jonson once again erects a defense for humors comedy as a genre. The Boy is the spokesman for the poet, who at this time of his life was bedridden from paralysis and unable to make it to the theater.
himself. He opens the Induction to the play by hawking the dramatic wares that have been the staples of Jonson’s city humors comedies:

What doe you lack, Gentlemen? what is’t you lack? any fine Phansies, Figures, Humors, Characters, Idæas, Definitions of Lords and Ladies? Waiting-women, Parasites, Knights, Captaines, Courtiers, Lawyers? what doe you lack? (1-5)

These stock characters and their stereotypical roles in the culture of the city, the proper stuff of comedy, as the Boy argues, will be the matter of the play that is to follow. As the Boy explains the concept of humors comedy to Damplay, thereby correcting his mistaken notions of what comedy should be, he situates the play within the Jonsonian canon by explaining its subtitle, *Humors Reconciled*:

The Author, beginning his studies of this kind, with *every man in his Humour*; and after, *every man out of his Humour*; and since, continuing in all his Playes, especially those of the Comick thred, whereof the *New-Inne* was the last, some recent humours still, or manners of men, that went along with the times, finding himselfe now near the close, or shutting up of his Circle, hath phant’odied to himselfe, in Idæa, this *Magnetick Mistris*. A Lady, a brave bountifull House-keeper, and a vertuous Widow: who having a young Niece, ripe for a man and marriageable, hee makes that his Center attractive, to draw thither a diversity of Guests, all persons of different humours to make up his Perimeter. And this hee hath call’d *Humours reconciled*. (98-111)
The Induction thus links this play explicitly to Jonson’s earliest humors comedies, in which clever servants and parasites like Brainworm and Carlo Buffone played perhaps their most prominent satiric roles, moving subversively through the urban society playing upon and exposing the vicious humors of the city’s gulls. In truth, the comic plot and structure of *The Magnetic Lady* is very close to those early humors comedies, with its clever servant figure, Mr. Compass, kinetically moving among the humors characters, scheming to engineer the plot to its comic conclusion, and exposing the vices and follies of the humors characters to ridicule along the way. The plot of the play at its opening, in fact, appears to be very much along the same lines as the comic plot of *Every Man in His Humor*. Compass invites his military friend Captain Ironside to join him in a day’s sport of observing the humors of the various visitors gathered at Lady Loadstone’s,

> Where there are Gentlewomen, and male Guests,
> Of severall humors, carriage, constitution,
> Profession too: but so diametrall
> One to another, and so much oppos’d,
> As if I can but hold them all together,
> And draw ‘hem to a sufferance of themselves,
> But till the Dissolution of the Dinner;
> I shall have just occasion to believe
> My wit is magisteriall; and our selves
> Take infinite delight, i’ the successe. (1.1.4-14)

Like Wellbred’s letter to Ed Knowell, Compass’s invitation promises Ironside that the whole day will be “for the sport: / For nothing else” of playing upon humors characters
(1.1.51-52). The rest of the play’s opening act holds to this humors comedy pattern, as Compass and Ironside meet the roster of Loadstone’s guests, and Compass anatomizes their characters in Theophrastian sketches that highlight their vices, all of which are stereotypical of their professions.

The stock of humors characters and their representative follies, as the Induction hints, is standard fare for the humors comedy: the sensuous churchman, Parson Palate; the effete courtier, Sir Diaphanous Silkworm; the quack doctor, Rut; the crooked lawyer, Mr. Practise; the corrupt political secretary, Mr. Bias; the garrulous and ignorant gossip, Mistress Polish; and the usurer, Sir Moath Interest. All of these characters are, of course, drawn to Lady Loadstone’s, as the Induction notes, by the prospect of marriage to Mistress Placentia, the Lady’s niece, and an heiress. Bias, Silkworm, and Practice are the chief rivals for Placentia; the others hope to sponge some money for their help in forwarding one or another of the suitors, while Sir Moath Interest, her uncle and the guardian of her estate, hopes to retain the bulk of the interest he has earned on it by striking a deal with the suitor he forwards, Mr. Bias.

Champion notes the continuity between the gulls and frauds that people Lady Loadstone’s house and the gulls in Jonson’s previous comedies, and argues that the comic business of *The Magnetic Lady* is much akin to those earlier plays. “Working in conjunction,” Champion writes, “Compasse and Ironside purge Lady Loadstone’s house, exposing the scheming manipulations of Dame Polish as well as the corrupt nature of the assemblage of fantasticks” (113). While the humors comedy satire of *The Magnetic Lady*, especially in the early scenes, assuredly has much in common with Jonson’s earlier humors comedies, as the play develops, a romance plot emerges, wherein it is revealed
that the gossip Polish, who had care of the Mistress Placentia along with her own
daughter, Pleasance, when they were very young children, has switched them in their
cradles in hopes of securing the Steele family fortune for her daughter. To make matters
more complex, the supposed Placentia turns out to be pregnant and gives birth to the
bastard child of Mr. Needle, Loadstone’s tailor. As the plot thickens, Compass must first
secure a secret marriage to his love interest, Pleasance, who is the real heiress, and then
prove her identity. He is opposed in this by not only Polish and by Placentia’s suitors,
but by Sir Moath Interest, who wants to prove Placentia to be both the real heiress and
unchaste so that he can keep the whole of her estate for himself.

Anne Barton’s reading of *The Magnetic Lady* not only sees the romance plot as
taking precedence over the humors satire in the play’s comic structure; she sees the two
comic motives as fundamentally incompatible (293). Barton describes the subordination
of the humors comedy satire as follows:

> In *Every Man In His Humour*, Jonson had made his New Comedy plot as
> perfunctory as possible, concentrating instead on that display of humours
> which constituted the real action of the play, and which the subsequent
> comical satires were to treat as a substitute for a story line. *The Magnetic
> Lady* reverses these earlier priorities. (293)

The humors satire in the early plays is Jonson’s dramatic method of “instructing” by
exposing social vices to ridicule and thus critiquing English culture. One of the primary
critiques the early humors comedies make is of the English social hierarchy’s habit of
rewarding wealth rather than merit, a critique that is shown by the dramatic
representation of radically un-meriting characters in positions of rank. The romance plot
that accompanies the humors satire in *The Magnetic Lady* reinforces that critique by dramatically representing the triumph of real merit in the victory of the party of Compass, Ironside, and Pleasance over the unscrupulous money-grubbers like Polish and Sir Moath Interest. In this way, like *The Staple of News* and *The New Inn*, *The Magnetic Lady* dramatically represents a version of an idealized meritocracy.

The meritocracy of *The Magnetic Lady* is, to some extent, already in effect at the opening of the play. Like Prudence in the Court of Love, Mr. Compass is in position of some authority, as the chief councilor to Lady Loadstone, though he has no social rank or apparent wealth. Compass is not exactly a servant in the same way that Prudence or Brainworm are servants. The list of the play’s persons describes him as, “A Scholler, Mathematick” (7). As a scholar with the favor of a high-ranking patron, Compass perhaps has more in common with the heroes of the “Comicall-Satyres” Crites (*Cynthia’s Revels*) and Horace (*Poetaster*) than with many of the servant characters. It is unclear whether or not he is a gentleman, though the play later reveals that he has a lucrative office in reversion, namely the “Surveyor of the Projects generall” (1.7.74). Clearly, he is not of the English servant *class*. He is, however, a servant in the sense that he is an advisor to Lady Loadstone, and in this capacity he fills the dramatic role of a typical clever servant in a formulaic Jonsonian humors comedy.

Ironically, Compass’s role as a servant is also the position from which he derives the authority that he wields in the play, for at the top of the play’s social hierarchy is the Lady Loadstone, and as her chief councilor, Compass has her ear almost unilaterally. Parson Palate notes his influence on Lady Loadstone when he advises the courtier Diaphanous Silkeworme that they must get the approval of Compass for his suit to
Placentia if he wishes to be successful. Palate offers to use what influence he has with the family to “work” Lady Loadstone

And Mr. Compasse, who is all in all:
The very Fly shee moves by: Hee is one
That went to Sea with her husband, Sir John Loadstone,
And brought home the rich prizes: all that wealth
Is left her; for which service she respects him:
A dainty Scholler in the Mathematicks;
And one shee wholly imploys. (2.4.9-15)

Compass’s position of respect is consistently explained in the play as a direct result of his wit, learning, and wisdom, as well as fear of his satiric power. Ironside testifies to Compass’s qualities in the opening scene when he tells him,

Sir, I confesse you to be one well read
In men, and manners; and that, usually,
The most ungovern’d persons, you being present,
Rather subject themselves unto your censure,
Then give you least occasion of distaste
by making you the subject of their mirth. (1.1.29-34)

Compass’s skill in prudent counsel is shown following the debacle of a dinner where Ironside assaults Silkworm when he convinces the affronted courtier not to sue, and thus cleverly reconciles the opposing humors by making peace (3.4.11-39). Throughout the play, Compass’s speech is peppered with the critical asides and proverbs that lament the
sad state of society which values virtue so lowly, asides that display the satiric irony

typical of all of Jonson’s servant satirists.

Lady Loadstone employs Compass in this play primarily in the capacity of a
councilor to help her prudently choose a suitor for Placentia, her niece. Loadstone has
been given this responsibility by the departed Steeles, presumably, to see that their
daughter is well married, and Loadstone takes this responsibility seriously, mulling over
whether the Lawyer Practise or the Courtier Silkworm presents a better situation for the
young heiress. When she tentatively decides on the lawyer Practise, she explains that it is
because he presents the best situation for Placentia:

The man I have design’d her to, indeed,
Is Master Practise: he’s a neat young man,
Forward, and growing up, in a profession!
Like to be some body, if the Hall stand!
And Pleading hold! A prime young Lawyers wife,
Is a right happy fortune. (2.3.44-49)

Her care for the fortune of her niece is in stark contrast to her brother, Sir Moath
Interest, who is only interested in keeping as much of his niece’s estate, which he has
been enjoying guardianship of, as he can. To this end, he is very solicitous for his suitor,
Mr. Bias, with whom he has struck a deal to sell Placentia for a dowry of £10,000, a sum
short of the £16,000 of her estate, and far short of what that estate values with the interest
he has made on it. When he first presents Bias to Lady Loadstone as a suitor, she
remarks on his rather curious crying up of the political secretary, and Compass’s satiric
jab exposes his real, monetary concern in the matter:
Lad. You praise him, brother, as you had hope to sell him.

Com. No Madam, as hee had hope to sell your Niece

Vnto him. (1.7.34-36)

Sir Moath Interest is a stereotypical Jonsonian money-bawd. Like Pennyboy Sr., he openly and freely confesses his idolatry of money as that commodity which makes the world turn. He goes so far as to even call the love of money a princely virtue:

My monies are my blood, my parents, kindred:
And he that loves not these, he is unnaturall:
I am perswaded that the love of monie
Is not a vertue, only in a Subject,
But might befit a Prince. (2.6.39-43)

Also typical of Jonsonian usurers, he touts the utility of money in Stuart society as outweighing merit in the culture’s estimation. He says that “wealth gives a man the leading voice, / At all conventions; and displaceth worth, / With generall allowance to all parties: / It makes a trade to take the wall of virtue” (2.6.77-80).

When it is rumored that Placentia has given birth to a bastard, and therefore is unmarriageable, Interest rejoices at the thought of being able to keep her entire estate, rather than empathetically mourn at his niece’s loss of reputation and prospects. His love of money, fittingly, is eventually his downfall – quite literally, as he falls in the courtyard well pursuing imaginary gold coins that the tailor Needle, by the device of his “prophetic” sleepwalking, makes the greedy Interest think are stored in the well. Compass triumphs over Moath Interest, finally, when he proves Pleasance’s identity as
the true heir and, gaining Loadstone’s approval as a suitor, claims not only her dowry but the interest it has accrued on her uncle’s watch.

The other major opposition to the comic triumph of Compass and Pleasance is the Gossip Polish. Like Interest, she is identified as being motivated by money lust; Parson Palate calls her a “shee-Parasite” (1.3.40). Polish’s chief vice, however, is her deceitful switching of the cradles and attempting to pass her own daughter off as the heir to the Steele fortune. Helen Ostovich, in “The Appropriation of Pleasure in The Magnetic Lady,” reads the contest between Compass and Polish over the identity of Pleasance and Placentia and the control of the Steele fortune as a conflict between patriarchal and matriarchal control of the processes of birthing and marriage, and consequently, control of estate inheritances. Ostovich argues,

The contest between Compass and Polish pits fertility, the sign of a woman’s strength, against chastity, the male control of that strength. Polish is outdone in this battle because the rules in place, despite her rearrangement of the details, are still male rules, and she cannot finally defeat the male construction of female duality and duplicity represented by her own daughter, false Pleasure, and corroborated by her foster-daughter, true Pleasure. (429)

While Ostovich’s reading reveals some telling assumptions about the “rightness” of patrilineal succession in the play, she seems to blur the lines between what she calls “male constructions” of Polish’s transgression – her attempt to subvert the male rules of succession – and the reality the play presents of the gossip’s actual attempt at a gross fraud by stealing the true heiress’s rightful estate for her daughter. Ostovich is quite right
to point out that the “male rules” of society ultimately benefit Compass with the control of Pleasance’s estate, but her argument fails to account for the terrible crime that would be perpetrated on Pleasance herself were Polish’s fraud to succeed. Polish symbolically recreates her crime when she locks Pleasance in an “old Botle-house, / Where they scrap’d trenchers” to keep her plan from being found out (5.8.49-50). Polish’s greatest vice is not her attempted subversion of patriarchal control of the Steele estate, but the criminal breech of trust she perpetrates against her foster-daughter. Compass’s indictment of Polish ultimately rings true, when he asks, after Pleasance is found in the kitchen trash, “Was ever any Gentlewoman us’d / So barbarously by a malitious Gossip, / Pretending to be Mother to her too?” (5.9.1-3). Whereas Polish transgresses the bond of love that should exist between herself and her foster-daughter because she is more interested in her fortune than her well-being, Mr. Compass’s relationship with Pleasance seems to be one founded on genuine affection, regardless of the estate. As the conversation between Compass and Pleasance at the end of Act Two hints, Compass’s romantic interest in Pleasance precedes his knowledge of her as the heiress to the Steele fortune.

*The Magnetic Lady* thus depicts Compass’s triumph over the humors characters, and especially over the gross vices of Sir Moath Interest and Dame Polish, as the triumph of meritorious virtue over wealth and fraud. The noble prize of the Steele family fortune is bestowed upon the meritorious clever servant, just as rank and wealth is restored to the Canter and awarded to Prudence and Lovel. The meritocracy of *The Magnetic Lady* is completed when, at the close, Lady Loadstone, like Lord Latimer, bestows herself in marriage on Compass’s “brother,” Captain Ironside. Ironside is a valorous, rather than a
braggadocio, cowardly soldier, and is thus characterized as worthy of the rank that he receives with the marriage to Loadstone.

Anne Barton’s reading of The Magnetic Lady notes the unprecedented extent to which Jonson inserts himself into this play. He is mentioned several times in the intercalary materials, as he is in the Intermeans of The Staple of News, but here he also inserts an attribution to himself, by name, of the epigrammatic character sketch, given by Compass, of Parson Palate. Ironside notes the peculiarly poetic nature of Compass’s description of the gustatory parson and asks, “Who made this EPIGRAMME, you?” to which Compass replies, “No, a great Clarke / As any’is of his bulke, (Ben: Ionson) made it” (1.2.33-34). Citing this exchange, Barton observes “that Compass is in some measure to be identified with Jonson himself” (296). As she points out, the name of Compass itself, evokes Jonson’s description of his impresa as “a broken compass” (296). Barton also suggests that as Compass is to be identified with the scholar Jonson, Ironside evokes the young and pugilistic soldier Jonson who had killed fellow actor Gabriel Spencer in a duel and, as he told Drummond, while serving in Flanders, had “killed ane Enemie and taken opima spolia from him” (245). She concludes that the dramatic union of these two sides of Jonson’s personality in the purgation of the humors in Lady Loadstone’s house may have been what Jonson envisioned in this play that closed his circle:

There were several reasons why he might have felt a particular affection for this retrospective comedy which harks back to and remakes the work of his youth. One of them, however, is likely to have been the opportunity it gave him to analyse the two sides of himself, and to create for them a
situation in which they might fruitfully work together and be harmonized in art as they had so often and disastrously failed to be in real life. (299)

_The Magnetic Lady_ certainly provides an opportunity, if this is Jonson’s intent, for artistic analysis and harmony of the self, but it also provides an opportunity to dramatically imagine and illustrate the reward due a true, instructive poet and ex-soldier like himself in the promotion of Ironside and Compass, especially Compass. Riggs’s reading of the Canter’s relationship to Pennyboy Jr. as a self-promoting allegory of good counsel, noted above, should be remembered in this regard. One might argue reasonably that all of Jonson’s clever servants represent the poet himself in some manner. Many critics, at least, have identified the satiric servants in his humors comedies as the on-stage “surrogates” of the dramatist. The promotion of Compass, who is most definitely a surrogate for Jonson is a dramatized fantasy of the poet finally receiving his due recognition. _The Magnetic Lady_ may be the last of Jonson’s comedies, or it may not. If it is, in its imagining of a meritocracy that awards the virtuous scholar and counselor with a promotion to wealth and rank fitting his status, then it is, indeed, a fitting close to its circle.

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1 As will be discussed in some detail below, Alan B. Farmer’s recent essay on this play and the Caroline English practice of “news-reading” challenges Lanier’s conclusions regarding the timeliness of this comedy. Judging from Farmer’s analysis, one might say that the moral satire of _The Staple of News_ is perhaps the most closely tied to specific contemporary cultural habits of any of Jonson’s comedies.

2 The subtitle of _The Magnetic Lady_ is _Humors Reconciled_.

3 Julie Sanders, for instance, laments the results of Barton’s influential reading of the late plays as Shakespearean in “_The New Inn_ and _The Magnetic Lady_: Jonson’s Dramaturgy in the Caroline Context,” when she says, “It would require another volume to explore in detail the denigrating and debilitating effect the Shakespearean comparison has often had on readings of Jonsonian drama” (52).

4 Chapter One discusses Macilente in depth.

5 Pennyboy Jr. is not, of course, Pennyboy Canter’s patron in the play’s final analysis, but he occupies that position for the greater part of the play.

6 Jonson’s construction and subsequent interrogation of the possibilities for a meritocracy, especially in _The New Inn_ and _The Magnetic Lady_ are explicitly taken up as topics of analysis in the works of Sanders, Clark, Ostovich, and Barton. Their criticism will be discussed explicitly below in the context of discussion of those two plays.
James’s marketing of aristocratic places is discussed at length in Chapter Two.

It is always important when discussing Jonson’s critique that “virtue” should merit reward to keep in mind that his definition of “virtue” is not limited to moral probity but includes various other abilities: valor, martial skill, education, wit, statesmanship, etc.

It is unclear in the play whether or not the Pennyboys are aristocracy or merely wealthy gentlemen, but Pennyboy Jr.’s marriage to the Lady Pecunia, Infantia of the Mines, would seemingly make him nobility at the play’s end.

Shargel’s article on the play’s form includes a lengthy and representative listing of twentieth century criticism of the play, ranging from L.C. Knights’s assertion that the play “manifests ‘uncertainty of purpose’” to W. David Kay’s blunt assertion that “at this stage in his career, Jonson was ‘no longer able to assimilate his various materials into a coherent whole’” (46).

Farmer elaborates on the straining of factions by “news” from the Thirty Years War as follows:

This war was followed by more readers, with greater regularity, for a longer period of time, than any war before it – because, as Jonson suggests, it was a war that polarized religious opinion in England. This religious polarization was, if not produced by, then exacerbated by the publication of corantos, which alerted readers to changes in the fortunes of Protestant and Catholic armies and therefore in the possible fate of the English church and, indeed, the fate of all Christendom. (129)

Farmer’s essay is an excellent account of the historical context for the specific satire of English culture contained in the dramatic depiction of the Office of the Staple.

In these lines, Jonson is apparently drawing a differentiation between reports in manuscript form and those that have gone to press (1.5.49-50).

Kifer notes the Staple as a satire of Caroline monopolies, specifically, the Wool Staple. She argues that Jonson’s “technique is to make the Staple Office a holiday joke in which the new business of newsmongering is blown up into a large-scale monopolistic enterprise like the venerable Wool Staple. News is issued under the Office Seal as a Staple commodity” (330).

This language, which speaks of the female as being possessed, is an unfortunate consequence of the play’s allegory that uses a female body to personify wealth.

Jonson criticizes Twelfth Night’s unrealistic plot in his conversations with William Drummond. He is recorded as saying, “Sheakƒpeare jn a play brought jn a number of men faying they had fuffered Shipwrack jn Bohemia, sher yr is no Sea neer by fome 100 Miles” (208-210).

Walsh’s discussion of the play in relation to Stuart heraldic practices uses the term “gentility” in discussing the titled class seemingly because that is the class of the particular claims to arms being investigated by the heralds in her historical research. Butler uses, “aristocracy,” appropriately, in his discussion of the discussion of the nature of nobility in the play itself, because the classes being interrogated and explored as to their true nature in The New Inn are aristocratic classes: lords and knights, as the discussion of the play below will make clear.

Clark’s thesis for the essay is as follows: “I will argue that the play’s surprisingly broad inclusivism is rooted in the social licence found in establishments of commercial hospitality, in a humanist and meritocratic conceptualization of civil conversation, and in a conviction that honest dialogue uttered in fellowship has spiritual and psychological value” (35).

The ethos of Clark’s “civil conversation” is defined by the spirit of joy: “The play dramatizes a relatively loose and easy social decorum which links civility not with ascribed nobility, but with joyous and charitable behavior. Joy is not limited to the elite, upstairs characters” (37).

The OED lists as its first adjectival definition for the word noble, “illustrious or distinguished by virtue of position, character, or exploits” with early seventeenth century quotations that demonstrate the word could be used synonymously with virtue: “1598 R. DALLINGTON View of Fraunce sig. S j’, Vertue makes Nobility, for, there are noble Peasants, and pleasantly Nobles. 1600 J. PORY tr. J. Leo Geogr. Hist. Afr. 47 They esteeemethemselues the most noble and worthy people under the heauens.”

This knowledge is open to readers of the play, but not viewers, because, though the play itself does not reveal Lord Frampul’s identity until the last act, The Persons of the Play preceding the published version of the play spoils the surprise.

The Host’s critique continues in a description of the life of a page that parodies Lovel’s. He claims that rather than learning nobility, in the modern court the page will learn To play Sir Pandarus my copy hath it,
And carry messages to Madam Cresside.
Instead of backing the brave Steed, o’ mornings,
To mount the Chambermaid; and for a leape
O’ the vaulting horse, to ply the vaulting house:
For the exercise of armes, a bale of dice,
Or two or three packs of cards, to shew the cheat,
And niblesse of hand: mistake a cloake
From my Lords back, and pawne it . . .
. . . These are the arts,
Or seuen liberal deadly sciences
Of Pagery, or rather Paganisme,
As the tides run. (1.3.70-83)

22 Ostovich’s essay, “Women’s Friendship in The New Inn,” sets the Lady Frampul/Prudence relationship in the context of several contemporary “fostering relationships” wherein young girls of aristocratic and common backgrounds were raised in the same households and so became intimate friends. Ostovich notes, “Despite differences in class, economic status, or other personal dimensions, the fostering relationship created intense friendships” in which lines of class demarcation where erased (9). Julie Sanders’s essay, “‘Wardrobe Stuffe’: Clothes, Costume and the Politics of Dress in Ben Jonson’s The New Inn” qualifies Ostovich’s claim by questioning just how much the lines of class distinction have been erased between Lady Frampul and Prudence. Commenting on the dressing scene in which Prudence is having trouble getting herself into her mistress’s dress, Sanders writes, “Whilst it would be wrong to dismiss [Ostovich’s] understanding of the women’s intimacy entirely (ensuing events depend, after all, on their cooperation in the performance of the ‘day’s sports’), the bitchiness and implicit sense of superiority involved in Lady Frances’s comments about Prudence’s size her should not be underestimated” (¶ 7).

23 Anne Barton’s chapter, “Hearking Back to Elizabeth,” in Ben Jonson, Dramatist contains a very thorough discussion of the influence of the cult of Elizabeth in late 1620s England.

24 This is the opinion of the editors of the Oxford edition, who place it last in their collection of all the completed dramatic works. Herford and Simpson believe that The Tale of a Tub’s Elizabethan elements indicate that it was probably composed in the sixteenth century and revised later in Jonson’s career. Anne Barton argues, however, that the Elizabethan element in The Tale of a Tub are in keeping with the later Jonson’s nostalgic direction in his comedies and argues that it was composed after The Magnetic Lady. In any case, it can be reasonably inferred from the introductory material to The Magnetic Lady that Jonson did write this comedy as if it were his last.

25 In keeping with his tone of unmitigated praise for The Magnetic Lady, Champion lauds the collection of humors characters in this play as the “most interesting” in the Jonsonian canon (114). He writes, “The innovations in each humour character and the combination of them as prototypes of specific professions—prototypes motivated by an avaricious craze for material possessions – is new and provides the opportunity for the widest sweep of Jonson’s caustic brush” (114-15)

26 The account of the duel with Spencer is recounted in Riggs’s biography (49-50).
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