

**AUTHOR, ACTOR AND AUDIENCE-FIGURES  
IN JONSONIAN COMEDY**

AUTHOR, ACTOR AND AUDIENCE FIGURES:  
THE THEATRICAL METAPHOR IN  
JONSONIAN COMEDY

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## ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I am concerned with Jonson's attitude toward theatricality in the world. His representation of a "centered self," especially in his poems, can be seen both as a part of the Renaissance concern with fashioning identity and as a protest against the theatrical role-playing it often caused. I am further interested in Jonson's conception of the nature of the theatre as a significant social activity. He employs the theatrical metaphor in Volpone, Epicoene, and The Alchemist in which clever author and actor-figures deceive less clever audience-figures who lack proper judgement. These characters reflect Jonson's awareness of his own engagement with his audience. The series of plays-within-the-play illustrate a theatre of deception and manipulation by which Jonson comes to measure both himself as a playwright and his art.

This study also attempts to come to terms with the interesting discrepancy between Jonson the moralist and Jonson the artist. There is a certain tension created in Jonsonian comedy when we consider that he infuses his theatrical tricksters with immense comic vigour. The audience's ability to pass judgement on the author and

actor-figures' subversive actions is complicated since they perform so amusingly and with such brilliance.

As well, I trace the development of Jonson's thinking about the nature and function of comedy. With each successive play, I find that he subtly disguises his moral idealism in order to write successful comedy. A problem with this formula was that it tended to mask Jonson's identity as a morally purposeful writer. Increasingly, his comedies seemed to owe their success to a triumph of theatrical over moral values. Jonson remains a morally responsible dramatist who incorporates into his art the critical acceptance of the stage as a medium.

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## DEDICATION

To my mother, father, and sister for their support and encouragement and, of course, Suzanne for all her love and patience

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## INTRODUCTION

Theatre established itself in the sixteenth and seventeenth century as a visible part of English society and culture. It became the dominant mode of entertainment and literary expression during the period in which Ben Jonson wrote. Since the theatre was such a dominant institution, the use of the theatrical metaphor became prevalent in the plays of Jonson and his contemporaries. Jonson was an extraordinarily self-conscious dramatist who actively sought to question the nature and value of the theatre in England. His use of author, actor, and audience-figures in Volpone (1606), Epicoene (1609), and The Alchemist (1610) appears complex in light of the discrepancy between Jonson the moralist, the man concerned with morally profitable drama and Jonson the man of popular theatre who seeks to entertain his audience. The curious manner in which the dramatist's critical and creative faculties are inextricably bound up with one another is an issue that warrants further investigation.

We are left to account for the tension created in these particular comedies as they display their moral and pleasurable elements. As a way of examining this tension, we should first consider Jonson's attitude to theatricality as it is influenced by his central ethical beliefs. At the



heart of Jonson's moral vision lies the concern for self-knowledge and consistent identity. This idea of the self is usually expressed in his poetry through images of a centre or circle. They are symbols of the individual who is complete, stable, and fixed (Greene 326). He portrays the self as a constant which should maintain its shape and consistency through changing circumstances.

A great deal of Jonson's nondramatic poetry concentrates on the ideal of the unmoved personality. The people who occasion some of Jonson's verse possess this quality of integrity. In the poem "An Epistle to Master John Selden," Jonson praises the idea of anchored strength:

you that have been  
Ever at home: yet, have all countries seen:  
And like a compass keeping one foot still  
Upon your centre, do your circle fill  
Of general knowledge . . . (29-33)

Similarly, in "To Sir Thomas Roe," Jonson advocates the virtues of personal self-sufficiency and resilience:

He that is round within himself, and straight,  
Need seek no other strength, no other height;  
Fortune upon him breaks herself, if ill,  
And what would hurt his virtue makes it still  
. . .  
Be always to thy gathered self the same . . .  
(3-6,9)

While the good man, according to Jonson, knows himself fully and remains always the same, the false man is characterized by changeability and inconsistency. He is, in fact, an actor who plays many roles, none of which is really himself. It is against such ideals as centeredness and integrity of the self that Jonson formulates his attitude

toward theatricality. Jonas Barish's comments in The Antitheatrical Prejudice are insightful in this regard.

"Wherever we look, then," he argues, "within the plays or outside them, in structure or in moralizing comment, we find a distrust of theatricality, particularly as it manifests itself in acting, miming, or changing, and a corresponding bias in favor of the 'real'--the undisguised, unacted, and unchanging" (151-152). Jonson himself makes this observation in Discoveries when he describes men who appear to live their lives as if they were actors on a stage:

I have considered, our whole life is like a play:  
wherein every man, forgetful of himself, is in  
travail with expression of another. Nay, we so  
insist in imitating others, as we cannot (when it  
is necessary) return to ourselves: like children,  
that imitate the vices of stammerers so long, till  
at last they become such; and make the habit to  
another nature, as it is never forgotten.

(1349-1357)

Jonson is naturally suspicious of theatricality and role-playing as a form of behaviour in the world. He dramatizes in the theatre this prejudice against acting in society.

Although Jonson's attitude is apparently harsh, he does attempt, through the theatrical metaphor, to encompass the dominant attitudes of his day. The Renaissance gave rise to the idea that man could remake his world in accordance with his conception of it. That is to say, Jonson's comedies also reflect the Renaissance compulsion for self-fashioning and versatility. The very nature of Jonson's world perpetuated the need for the individual to shape and control his identity through theatrical

construction. Jonson exploits the idea that this form of theatricality arises from the individual's need for recognition and attention in a world dominated by the court. "The manuals of court behavior," as Stephen Greenblatt points out in his book Renaissance Self-Fashioning, "which became popular in the sixteenth century are essentially handbooks for actors, practical guides for a society whose members were nearly always on stage" (162). Jonson seems to dramatize the conflict between the old Stoic conception of self-sufficiency and the new Renaissance humanism which has meaning both for himself and his audience.

Volpone, Epicoene, and The Alchemist have been selected for this study since they embody the dramatist's complicated treatment of the theatrical metaphor. These comedies present the world as a stage wherein clever author and actor-figures construct theatrical performances in the presence of less clever audience-figures. Barish, in fact, identifies these very comedies for their self-conscious theatricality (145-146). Moreover, Barish suggests that "Jonson's attitude toward theater was split by contradictions" (132) and it is this point which I believe needs to be examined in greater detail. The fact that Jonson's actor and author-figures possess such compelling force must make us doubt the idea that they are created for the purpose of our disapproval. That is to say, it would be misleading to suggest that the appeal of Jonsonian comedy is tied purely to its moral or instructional qualities. He

infuses his characters with a comic vitality that is as much a part of his own make-up as his ethical beliefs.

I am interested in tracing the development of Jonson's attitude toward comedy as it evolves from Volpone through Epicoene and to The Alchemist. These particular plays become central in tracing the notion that Jonson becomes a more mature dramatist as he increasingly disguises his ethical beliefs in order to write successful drama. These plays are testimony to his developing acceptance of a "profit and pleasure" philosophy in writing for the stage. We witness Jonson's struggle to come to terms with his vocation as a playwright, the expectations of his audience, and the question of how theatre is to be valued.

## CHAPTER ONE

### "This my posture": Volpone

In Volpone, Ben Jonson employs the theatrical metaphor to question and evaluate himself as a playwright and the nature of the spectator's experience in the theatre. The series of plays-within-the-play have Volpone and Mosca figuring prominently as clever author and actor figures who capitalize on the gullibility of their less clever audience by creating dramas of manipulation. The play presents such grave issues as the loss of identity, avarice, and the perversion of Christian values, and it is against that background that Volpone and Mosca perform so amusingly. After the three "comical satires" where instruction and entertainment had sometimes been at odds, Volpone marks a significant development in Jonson's attitude toward comedy as the theatrical qualities in the action of the play make their presence felt alongside of its moral directives. The audience is forced to come to terms with its judgement on what passes on stage in a way that makes the treatment of theatricality in Volpone extraordinarily intriguing.

Volpone features so many independent plays and performances within the context of the larger play itself that the theatrical metaphor takes its place among the play's dominant structural patterns. This point was first

made by Kernan in the Yale edition of the play published in 1962 and has been commented on by many subsequent critics. Of the three plays being discussed in this study, Volpone most clearly shows Jonson expressing the theatrical metaphor in physical terms. The dramatist reinforces this concept by incorporating a theatre within a theatre. Mosca's interlude is a staged play with characters in costume and Volpone seated as an audience. Volpone's large four-poster bed resembles a stage with curtains. Scoto's mountebank scene takes place on a raised platform stage, physically erected by Mosca and Nano. Even the two courtroom scenes would be staged to look like plays with the various characters being observed by the judges sitting on a raised dais. It is not until Bartholomew Fair that Jonson returns to this physical representation of theatre in the form of the puppet play.

The presence of the theatrical metaphor is apparent even as early as the play's first scene. Volpone's opening speech is self-consciously theatrical when he displays for the first time the role-playing and propensity for self-dramatization which continue throughout the play. The extravagant and vivid language of this actor is matched only by the imagery which it describes. The sense of Volpone's sheer delight in twisting conventional Christian language for his own purposes is present before our very eyes. "We cannot but acknowledge," claims Martin Butler, "the deftness and wit of his expression, and recognize that his mind

possesses real theatrical and linguistic power . . ." (21). Indeed, the opening lines of the play show him wittily improvising a mock-encomium. That he himself enjoys the irreverent association of religious words such as "shrine" (2), "saint" (2), "adoration" (12), and "sacred" (13) with something so worldly and secular as gold is testimony to the kind of creative energy which characterizes this inversion of values:

Good morning to the day; and next, my gold!  
 Open the shrine that I may see my saint.  
 Hail the world's soul, and mine! More glad than is  
 The teeming earth to see the longed-for sun  
 Peep through the horns of the celestial Ram,  
 Am I, to view thy splendor darkening his . . . .  
   O thou son of Sol,  
 But brighter than thy father, let me kiss,  
 With adoration, thee, and every relic  
 Of sacred treasure in this blessed room.  
(1.1.1-6,10-13)

Alexander Leggatt in his article "The Suicide of Volpone" argues persuasively that Volpone's opening lines are initial evidence of the self-conscious posturing that he engages in as the play proceeds. He writes: "The perverted religious imagery with which Volpone's day begins is just one more act, one more piece of entertainment which he leaves behind in going on to other amusements. The cheerful impudence of his language indicates that he enjoys the blasphemy for its own sake; there is a deliberate self-awareness, a carefulness about his perversion of religious language that suggests the actor relishing his part" (22). Although his treatment of the subject matter in

his speech is highly questionable, his appeal is undeniable. Even at this early point, the audience is placed in the difficult position of determining the nature of their response to Volpone's theatricality.

Furthermore, Volpone's own words would seem to suggest that the speech is exactly that, a speech. His interests lie not so much in the actual possession of wealth as the mischievous and deceptive means through which it is acquired. He claims "Yet, I glory/More in the cunning purchase of my wealth/Than in the glad possession . . ." (1.1.30-32). At this point, Volpone's acting abilities are associated most clearly with the traditional fox figure, a creature well known for its abilities in role-playing and disguise. Although the association with Reynard identifies Volpone as a type of Satanic figure representing rapacity and deceit, it is also clear that both figures enjoy the sheer amoral pleasure that acting and deception bring. When Volpone feigns sickness for the benefit of the legacy-seekers, he is perhaps pursuing pleasure more than profit.

In fact, the whole notion of acting or role-playing, and the enjoyment that this form of deception brings, indicates the type of life to which Volpone sees himself called. That is to say, his conception of his lot in life seems limited to the entertainment he receives from his own acting and play-writing abilities. He states rather matter-of-factly, "What should I do/But cocker up my genius



and live free/To all delights my fortune calls me to?" (1.1.70-72). Jonson has created Volpone's theatre world as one of self-interest only. Since he conceives of life as a play, with himself as both author and actor, he causes his spectators to display their foolishness not in order to reform them but merely to entertain himself and make himself rich (Sweeney 74). Volpone describes the way in which his manipulative performance as a dying man is both amusing and lucrative:

All which I suffer, playing with their hopes,  
And am content to coin 'em into profit,  
And look upon their kindness, and take more,  
And look on that; still bearing them in hand,  
Letting the cherry knock against their lips,  
And draw it by their mouths, and back again . . .  
(1.1.85-90)

The gulls who represent the audience figures in Volpone are all too willing to pay Volpone for dramas which cater to their selfish desires. He does not care for the audiences for whom he writes and acts beyond what he receives in return from them.

Volpone's attitude toward his audience and the depiction of the nature of this theatre have serious implications for Jonson himself. I think Jonson is making a parallel between himself and a dramatist who has learned to attract and profit from audiences, while subjecting them to some kind of test. If Volpone can be analyzed as an expression of the relationship between a playwright and his audience, then Sweeney's comments in his book Jonson and the

Psychology of Public Theatre are particularly insightful since they illustrate an implicit connection between the theatres of Volpone and Ben Jonson. "I think," he argues, "there is good reason to believe that at this moment in his career Jonson shared with this magnificent creature an interest in the theater as a place to manipulate foolish and ignorant spectators 'playing with their hopes . . . content to coyne 'hem into profit'" (75). Arguably, Jonson is playing with the idea that popular drama merely preys upon the shortcomings of its audience by feeding them the unsubstantial entertainment they desire. Sweeney claims on several occasions that Jonson was constantly assessing the character of his audience and often found them selfish and wanting in judgement. Not surprisingly, Jonson felt an ambivalence about the stage as a medium for communicating important ethical issues to the playhouse audience. As Barish argues, Jonson's audience ". . . cannot truly measure the worth of what is offered them; they are bent on instant gratifications of a kind he has little wish to supply, and are, in the nature of things, prone to be swayed by opinion rather than reason" (139). Volpone is the picture of the self-interested dramatist who shares the very same qualities of his audience and exploits them in his dramas. The audience's test, then, is to recognize the important distinction between Volpone's theatre of manipulation and Jonson's theatre of instruction. As is so

often the case, Volpone's actions and words must be evaluated in terms of what they reveal about Jonson's thoughts concerning the stage.

The play contains several smaller plays-within-the-play which have thematic relevance to Jonson's use of the theatrical metaphor. Mosca's interlude in Act One, Scene Two is a little play which he himself writes and directs and features Nano, Androgyno, and Castrone as its cast. The interlude relates the story of the Pythagorean transmigration of the soul. Nano, the dwarf, discusses, in rather awkward verse, how the soul of Apollo has come to take up residence in Androgyno after having moved downward through the entire chain of being. The basic theme of the interlude is the process of gradual degeneration. The classic explanation of this is Harry Levin's article "Jonson's Metempsychosis." The soul that the hermaphrodite now possesses has passed through all conditions of man and beast after having once been housed in the body of a god. Not only is the theme of the play base and disturbing, but the characters who act it out are also perverse, monstrous, and unnatural. The cast itself is a ghastly combination of a hermaphrodite, a eunuch, and a dwarf. This is a stage of deformed actors who typify the perversion of values and culture in this dramatic world. Of course, Volpone becomes the audience for this show and his favourable response--"very, very pretty!" (1.2.63)--again

can be taken as an index to his debased theatrical tastes (Butler 37). Indeed, this is a play written for and well suited to its audience. Mosca constructs his play only to serve his audience's base instincts. In this way, Mosca, much like Volpone and the other author-figures in these comedies, is a playwright by whom Jonson must measure himself.

The arrival of the first legacy-seeker to Volpone's house marks the beginning of a series of separate performances in which Volpone and Mosca display their theatrical talents. Even as the interlude ends, a new audience is ready to enter this theatre, and the next cast and crew scramble to prepare for their play. The initial performances must be convincing in order to prolong their run and thereby ensure a continuing audience. In these initial scenes, Volpone shows us his impressive acting abilities when he plays "a sick and dying man to perfection, coughing at the right moment, seeming to recover slightly when necessary, moving his hands weakly or lying perfectly still according to what the situation requires" (Kernan 8). This actor's attention to the details of his role is extraordinary, if not excessive. He gives his stage-manager orders and prepares himself:

Loving Mosca!  
 [Looking into a mirror.]

'Tis well. My pillow now, and let him enter.  
[Exit Mosca.]

Now, my feigned cough, my phthisic, and my gout,  
 My apoplexy, palsy, and catarrhs,  
 Help, with your forced functions, this my posture  
 . . .  
 He comes, I hear him--uh! uh! uh! uh! O--  
(1.2.122-128)

Surely the deliberate disregard for the integrity of the self is a form of inauthentic behaviour which the didactic element in Jonson's writing sought to illustrate. However, as Barish argues, into characters like Volpone "Jonson uses a heavy current of his own creative energy, which counteracts to some extent the formal disapproval he may think he wishes us to feel" (153-154). Volpone's sheer theatrical appeal works against our desire to censure him. Against our better judgement, we are intrigued and even amused rather than disgusted by Volpone's actions. We can account for this peculiar reaction in light of Jonson's developing attitude toward the function of comedy. He remains a morally responsible dramatist who seeks to complicate the audience's task of judging the issues presented on stage.

Thomas M. Greene in his article "Ben Jonson and the Centered Self" argues that the subject of Volpone is ". . . Protean man, man without core and principle and substance . . . For Volpone asks us to consider the infinite, exhilarating, and vicious freedom to alter the

self at will once the idea of moral constancy has been abandoned" (337). Volpone's entire existence seems to be spent playing a series of roles, none of which is really him. In addition to playing a dying man, his repertoire expands to include other characters. When driven by lust for Celia, Volpone takes on the role of Scoto of Mantua, a Venetian mountebank. Ostensibly, Volpone's motivation in playing the part is to catch a glimpse of Celia, and yet he seems equally interested in asking questions about the finer points and success of his performance:

Is not the color o' my beard and eyebrows  
To make me known?  
MOSCA. No jot.  
VOLPONE. I did it well. . . .  
But were they gulled  
With a belief that I was Scoto? (2.4.30-31,34-35)

He does, in fact, assume the role of the mountebank so completely that, as Mosca says "Sir,/Scoto himself could hardly have distinguished!" (2.4.35-36). Volpone's impersonation of Scoto, like his opening speech, is filled with an energy and persuasiveness that make his appeal as a character undeniable.

Moreover, Kernan, in his notes on the play, analyzes the Scoto play in terms of its biographical parallels with Jonson. Kernan makes the connection between the Scoto of sixteenth-century Venice and Ben Jonson in seventeenth-century London. As Scoto proclaims his scorn for other mountebanks because of their questionable sources, so too

had Jonson ". . . been contemptuous of the petty playwrights of the day who borrowed liberally from other authors to provide sensational theatrical fare for the groundlings . . ." (215). Jonson's writing often conveys his anger with authors who rework old material. His contempt for bad theatre of the day and its writers is evident in the Epistle to Volpone:

But it will here be hastily answered that the writers of these days are other things: that not only their manners, but their natures, are inverted, and nothing remaining with them of the dignity of poet but the abused name, which every scribe usurps; that now, especially in dramatic, or, as they term it, stage poetry, nothing but ribaldry, profanation, blasphemy, all license of offense to God and man is practiced. (30-36)

Scoto is an image of the perversion of proper drama. Unlike Jonson who offers entertainment and useful instruction, the mountebank only peddles false medicines without cures.

Furthermore, Douglas Duncan, in his book Ben Jonson and the Lucianic Tradition, also perceives parallels between Volpone and Jonson in the Scoto play. Both are having their plays put on in new locations; Scoto in ". . . an obscure nook of the/Piazza" (2.2.38) and Jonson's Volpone at the Globe theatre, not at the Blackfriars where his two previous comedies had been staged. Just as Volpone claims to ". . . have nothing to sell, little or nothing to sell" (2.2.72), so too is Jonson disclaiming any attempt to sell a stern moral message. Both, of course, have a secret purpose. Volpone has come to catch a glimpse of the beautiful Celia.

Jonson, on the other hand, is testing his spectators' powers of discrimination. As Duncan says, the playwright's aim was to subject his audience ". . . to his private purpose, the test of a searching inquisition" (154). Jonson conveys his aim in the form of a disclaimer.

The *Scoto* play also has significance in terms of what it says about Jonson's conception of his audience. This is a performance acted out before Sir Politic Wouldbe and Peregrine, among others. Again, the dramatist is playing with the idea of the theatre's place in society as a significant social activity. There are those who are exposed to unsubstantial theatre and are convinced of its value. Sir Politic Wouldbe is the representation of the ignorant and gullible Englishman in search of culture and superficial entertainment. *Scoto* is a false playwright who bows before the simple tastes of his audience as they are illustrated in Sir Politic. The latter's asides to Peregrine during the play demonstrate that he is unintelligent, misguided, and completely convinced of whatever he witnesses. He believes Volpone's act is authentic and that what he says is true:

They are the only knowing men of Europe!  
Great general scholars, excellent physicians,  
Most admired statesmen, professed favorites  
And cabinet counselors to the greatest princes!  
The only languaged men of all the world! (2.2.9-13)

Wouldbe's credulous enthusiasm prevents him from making the realization that *Scoto*'s learned terms exist only for the



sake of sounding that way. There is no real substance lying beneath this medical terminology.

Moreover, there are other members of Jonson's audience who, embodied in the character of Peregrine, viewed theatre as nothing more than a form of fraud. Peregrine represents the thinking man's attitude to theatrical chicanery and his words convey a deep distrust of the theatre. He identifies the emptiness and lack of substance that lie behind the façade of false language. Peregrine makes the point that mountebanks,

. . . are most lewd impostors,  
 Made all of terms and shreds; no less beliers  
 Of great men's favors than their own vile medicines;  
 Which they will utter upon monstrous oaths,  
 Selling that drug for twopence, ere they part,  
 Which they have valued at twelve crowns before.

(2.2.14-19)

In the figures of Scoto, Sir Pol, and Peregrine, Jonson displays his concerns about the English stage. They all represent the evils which threatened the theatre as a significant social activity in Jonson's time. Sweeney makes this point when he suggests that Jonson's ". . . defense against the subversive elements [in theatre] was to parade them on stage in order to neutralize them" (83).

The attempted rape of Celia is another play-within-the-play in Volpone which allows Jonson to explore several issues within the theatrical metaphor. Volpone's seduction speech to Celia reveals his disturbing lack of identity and the complete extent to which he is dominated by the idea of

transformation. He promises Celia an existence of virtually infinite role-playing as he says:

Whilst we, in changèd shapes, act Ovid's tales,  
Thou like Europa now, and I like Jove,  
Then I like Mars, and thou like Erycine;  
So of the rest, till we have quite run through,  
And wearied all the fables of the gods.  
(3.7.221-225)

The list of roles goes on to include the "more modern forms" which Celia will take on and to which Volpone adds, ". . . I will meet thee in as many shapes . . ." (3.7.233).

Volpone's propensity for and obsession with acting reveal the disturbing fact that both lovers will change their form to such an extent that they will be, ultimately, everyone but their true selves.

Apart from the images of Protean transformation, the kind of relationship which Volpone offers Celia is self-consciously theatrical. In his appeal to her, he characterizes himself as he once was when he played the role of a young and vigorous lover in a play years before:

I am, now, as fresh,  
As hot, as high, and in as jovial plight  
As when in that so celebrated scene  
At recitation of our comedy,  
For entertainment of the great Valois,  
I acted young Antinous, and attracted  
The eyes and ears of all the ladies present,  
T' admire each graceful gesture, note, and footing.  
(3.7.157-164)

Volpone threatens to carry out this despicable act as if it were merely just another performance to please his egotistical appetites. However, it is against the extremely

grave background of the threatened rape of a virtuous woman that Volpone plays out his role with such vigour. Jonson deliberately sets up a conflict for his spectators between Volpone's seductive showmanship and the ethical principles which they are expected to bring into play from the outside. These issues are never far from the surface so that the audience must balance their enjoyment of this particular scene with the recognition of what this says about their sensibilities.

Mosca, too, is an author and actor-figure but on a level quite different from that of Volpone because there are ulterior motives lying beneath his role-playing. While Volpone's real compulsion and pleasure lie in acting and play-making themselves, Mosca's talents are more purely profit-oriented. His skill is not the virtuosity of his patron who can maintain one role convincingly for the length of an entire performance. Rather, Mosca's dramatic talents are versatility and flexibility--"The lightning quick multiplication of roles and the ability to appear in an infinite number of masks simultaneously" (Hyland 79). He can become whatever his clients wish him to be and can act in accordance with what the situation requires. Anne Barton describes Mosca as representing a theatre of "self-annihilation, the selfless enactment of roles created by others" (77). The subtlety, alacrity, and adeptness with which Mosca assumes and discards roles is an art of which he

alone is master. In his soliloquy of self-praise which begins the third act, Mosca comes to understand himself as,

. . . your fine, elegant rascal, that can  
rise  
And stoop, almost together, like an arrow;  
Shoot through the air as nimbly as a star;  
Turn short as doth a swallow; and be here,  
And there, and here, and yonder, all at once;  
Present to any humor, all occasion;  
And change a visor swifter than a thought . . .  
(3.1.23-29)

Mosca's malleable spirit allows him to be completely free from the constrictions of reality and constancy that are imposed on those who try to remain genuine. Mosca becomes the epitome of the Renaissance cult of versatility--the ability to constantly renew oneself extemporaneously.

A clear example of the difference between the acting abilities of Volpone and Mosca is found in Act Four, Scene Four. Volpone in Act One has played a sick man to Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino effectively, yet these are all re-enactments of basically the same role in separate performances. In court, however, Mosca can act the role of confidant with all three simultaneously. He succeeds in fuelling the fire of the three characters' greed by seeming to be the advocate of each man's interests only. Jonson's dialogue conveys the comic quality of Mosca's theatricality. Corvino's fear of Voltore's success initiates the performance, and it is to him that he first speaks:

Why, we'll think:  
 Sell him for mummia, he's half dust already.  
 [Turns away from Corvino and speaks to Voltore.]  
 Do not you smile to see this buffalo,  
 How he doth sport it with his head?--I should,  
 If all were well and past. (To Corbaccio.)  
     Sir, only you  
 Are he that shall enjoy the crop of all,  
 And these not know for whom they toil. (4.4.13-19)

Mosca's versatility allows each of the legacy-seekers to maintain the illusion that his needs alone are to be served.

While it is important to recognize Mosca's abilities as an actor, one must also realize that his theatrical talents extend a great deal beyond this. Kernan's comments in the introduction to the Yale edition of Volpone provide valuable insight into Mosca's involvement in the theatricality of the play. Mosca is a superb make-up and costume assistant. He applies the ointment to Volpone's eyes in Act One, Scene Two so that he will appear as a dying man. He retrieves and arranges his master's sick dress, and later it is he who knows one of the commandadori from whom he may steal a uniform for Volpone's purposes. However, as a director and producer, the parasite is superlative. In the sick-bed plays of Acts One and Three, Mosca "prepares Volpone for his role," "coaches him on how to act," (8) and maintains a guiding hand in stopping Volpone from getting out of character prematurely in expressing his happiness over their early success.

Indeed, the courtroom play in the fourth act is a product of theatrical genius. The courtroom itself, with

its performers acting out a conflict and the four avvocatori functioning as the audience, represents the basic requirements for a theatrical performance. Mosca's masterful directing succeeds in compensating for his miscalculation in the third act when Bonario rescues Celia from Volpone's clutches. The parasite has even written the script--"I devised a formal tale" (4.4.7)--and Voltore, because his profession as a lawyer has always required some degree of acting ability, is appropriately given the lead. The director checks with his cast prior to their going on stage to make sure all is set:

MOSCA.	Is the lie
Safely conveyed amongst us?	Is that sure?
Knows every man his burden?	
CORVINO.	Yes.
MOSCA.	Then shrink not.
	(4.4.3-5)

The theatrical nature of the action is fully realized as the false witnesses play their stock parts and Volpone's timely entrance as a dying invalid validates the entire preceding testimony. While the courtroom scene does represent the black issue of the perversion of proper justice, the author and actor-figures win our admiration as their helpless victims fail to obtain our sympathy.

While Volpone and Mosca's abilities at creating a world of theatrical illusion for their audience ensure their initial success, it is their continual fascination with role-playing that is the key to their eventual downfall.

Mosca has the professional judgement to realize that the courtroom play should constitute an excellent closing night performance to end their run, as he exclaims, "We must here be fixed;/Here we must rest. This is our masterpiece;/We cannot think to go beyond this" (5.2.12-14). Volpone, however, is unable to relinquish the influence and authority he has maintained in his theatre. Alexander Leggatt's comments in his book Ben Jonson: His Vision and His Art are helpful as they attempt to explain Volpone's motivation in artistic terms. He writes:

His artist's instinct urges him to finish his comedy and put it in its final form, and the best ending he can think of is to pretend to die and leave Mosca the heir. It is indeed a fine, decisive ending for the comedy he has played with his dupes and as he hides behind the curtain and watches the reading of the will he shows all the glee of an author on a successful first night. (28)

There are, however, two author-figures in Volpone. Volpone's death play conflicts with Mosca's "fox-trap" (5.5.18) play and, consequently, both of their theatres collapse.

The ending of Volpone is significant not only for what it says about Volpone and Mosca's obsession with theatricality but also for how it reflects Jonson's changing attitude toward comedy. Critics such as Barish and Watson are in agreement that the moral ending, in light of the fact that the body of the play champions the sheer delight of theatrical deception, is too punitive and constitutes

nothing less than a betrayal of the audience's expectations. It would seem that the play's ending reflects the clash of Jonson's original critical values and his new artistic values. Katherine Eisaman Maus in her book Ben Jonson and the Roman Frame of Mind identifies the excessive moral tone of Jonson's earlier plays, the comical satires, as the reason for their dramatic failure. She writes: ". . . their explicit didacticism creates major dramatic problems. The stark moral choices Jonson presents seem simplistic, and his bullying of the audience seems intolerable" (54). Because Jonson was influenced by the Roman moralists, he inherited the old Senecan assumption, as Maus claims, that virtue and pleasure were necessarily opposites. Jonson, therefore, adopts a new mature perception of the nature of the stage as he progresses, perhaps reluctantly at first, toward a more dramatically successful compromise of instruction and pleasure.

The playwright's interest in cultivating the Horatian formula of "utile dulci" in his comedies is present in the prologue to Volpone as he claims that his ". . . true scope, if you would know it,/In all his poems still hath been this measure:/To mix profit with your pleasure; . . ." (6-8). The epistle of dedication to "The Two Famous Universities" that precedes the play in the printed text still shows the influence of the Roman tradition imposing itself from the outside on Jonson's writing. He



rationalizes and even apologizes for the way in which the ending of Volpone violates its intended comic effect. He writes:

. . . though my catastrophe may in the strict rigor of comic law meet with censure, as turning back to my promise; I desire the learned and charitable critic to have so much faith in me to think it was done of industry . . .

But my special aim being to put the snaffle in their mouths that cry out: We never punish vice in our interludes, &c. I took the more liberty  
 . . . (104-107, 109-111)

As the Epistle demonstrates, Jonson is still very much influenced by the moralistic attacks on the theatre. It is, after all, as Jonson says, ". . . the office of a comic poet to imitate justice, and instruct to life, . . ." (115-116). Clearly, the Epistle and the Prologue assert the play's didactic function. However, while Jonson's moral concerns still lie very much at the centre of the work, its theatrical appeal makes its presence felt like never before. Volpone reflects the point in Jonson's career when the tension between these two elements is most apparent and overt.

Indeed, the play's final speech reinforces the tension between Jonson's moral and artistic directives. It points in the direction which his comedies will now head. While it has been Volpone the character who has been justly and severely punished by Venetian law, the actor who plays him is the one who steps forward to address the audience. He says:

The seasoning of a play is the applause.  
Now, though the fox be punished by the laws,  
He yet doth hope there is no suff'ring due  
For any fact which he hath done 'gainst you.  
If there be, censure him; here he doubtful stands.  
If not, fare jovially, and clap your hands.  
(5.12.152-157)

The actual actor on stage asks the spectators to disregard the moral judgement placed on the character in the play itself and focus rather on the delight and amusement they have experienced while sitting in the theatre. He is relying on the assumption that his audience of peers will acquit him. Thus, our applause, instead of acting as a condemnation of the unethical nature of theatricality in Volpone, succeeds in showing our acceptance of it. Our applause, then, at the end of the play is a clear indication of how complicated the moral judgement of an audience has become.

## CHAPTER TWO

"Nor is it only while you keep your seat . . .": Epicoene  
Epicoene, first acted in 1609 or 1610, deals more maturely with similar concerns and shows a marked development in Jonson's attitude to both his art and the audience for whom it is written. His fundamental dramatic vision has not changed, but the conflict between his moral and artistic concerns has become much more subtle and disguised. Sweeney notes this progression:

The play itself, however, goes further than any of Jonson's previous plays toward reconciling two elements of recreation that he often felt to be seriously at odds: profit, with its concomitants, morality, learning, and social order and pleasure, the immediate visceral, and self-gratifying response to experience, which Jonson suspected as a narcotic, the agent of consuming self-indulgence and social chaos. Epicoene attempts to deal with the disparity between profit and pleasure with new sophistication; instead of denying it or stressing one extreme over the other, Jonson painstakingly seeks a resolution. (107)

The violent opposition between Jonson's didactic and artistic concerns which characterizes Volpone is no longer apparent. Rather, here the playwright carries his ethical responsibilities with extraordinary lightness. Undoubtedly, the spirit of Epicoene is quite lively and delightful.

Jonson displays his self-awareness and the complexity of his evolving dramatic vision by subtly integrating his moral ideals with theatrical appeal. The

idea that he is placing considerably more emphasis on the pleasurable elements in his comedies is clear in the prologue to the play. He writes: "Our wishes, like to those make public feasts,/Are not to please the cook's tastes, but the guests'" (8-9). Jonson makes clear the fact that he wants to cultivate the interests of his audience rather than his own. In fact, he refuses to be one of those writers ". . . That only for particular likings care/And will taste nothing that is popular" (5-6). An analogy is made between good comedy and a public banquet. Epicoene is laid out in front of an audience like a giant feast.

However, Jonson is quick to remind his audience that his didactic concerns are still mixed with his desire to entertain. This is a feast which will present courses to suit even the most discriminating of palates. Even the harshest critic will find something to please him and some will say that the Jonson who wrote the scenes with the most instruction could so have written the entire play:

Yet if those cunning palates hither come,  
 They shall find guests' entreaty and good room;  
 And though all relish not, sure there will be  
     some  
 That, when they leave their seats, shall make 'em  
     say,  
 Who wrote that piece, could so have wrote a  
     play,  
 But that he knew this was the better way.  
 For to present all custard or all tart  
 And have no other meats to bear a part,  
 Or to want bread and salt, were but coarse art.  
(10-18)

Indeed, the exquisite and covert mixture of pleasure and profit is a "better way" than narrow didacticism.

Jonson's attempt to tackle important issues of his day on stage in Epicoene is evidence of his growing mastery of his material. He deals critically and delightfully with the need of the Renaissance courtier to construct and project an identity. This form of theatricality is expressed in the characters Sir John Daw and Sir Amorous La Foole. Both present elaborately constructed roles and thereby reflect the increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable and artful process that was so endemic in the Renaissance. Daw, for example, is the portrait of a pretender to wit and learning. Truewit comments that this false and pathetic knight is ". . . a fellow that pretends only to learning, buys titles, and nothing else of books in him" (1.2.70-72). "Self-fashioning," writes Greenblatt, "always involves . . . some effacement or undermining, some loss of self" (4). Likewise, Daw's essential loss of self and pretentious attitude to literature expose him in his folly. For him, poetry is a vehicle for self-display so that he might impose his false judgements on others for his own sake. His attempts at erudite criticism of ancient authors illustrate the lack of a centered self which might prove efficacious in making discerning judgements.

Through Daw, Jonson displays his critical awareness that court-life demanded some show of individuality. Since rhetoric became a linguistic tool for fashioning identity, as Greenblatt suggests, Daw attempts to convey his uniqueness in a verbal attack on several serious and moral writers. He exclaims, "The dor on Plutarch, and Seneca, I hate it! They are mine own imaginations, by that light. I wonder those fellows have such credit with gentlemen! . . . Grave asses! Mere essayists! A few loose sentences, and that's all . . . I do utter as good things every hour, if they were collected and observed, as either of 'em" (2.3.42-44,46-49). Jonson is obviously parodying the courtier's effort to impose his fiction on the world.

If Daw is a pretender to learning and intelligence, then Sir Amorous La Foole is an affecter of gallantry and nobility of ancestry. He pretends to all the trappings of a high social position and this is his attempt at crafting his public role. When he is presented in front of Dauphine and Clerimont later in Act One, La Foole proceeds to give a long discourse on the history of the family's lineage, practically in one breath. He has been known to hold banquets and parties for the sole purpose of ingratiating himself with the nobility. Clerimont describes him as a fine dresser or fop who lacks any real intelligence. Jonson, in fact, points out the hilarious fact that La Foole is completely unaware of any division between role-playing

and reality. He has been known to salute and embarrass a lady by revealing her identity when she is dancing in a masque. The delightful appeal of La Foole's character is obvious as Jonson illustrates how ridiculous the theatricality of court-life can be. The age's blind compulsion toward role-playing in both Daw and La Foole is evident as both take on the very attributes that are imposed on them by those who wish to exploit them. Dauphine comments on their credulity and lack of sound judgement: ". . . you may take their understandings in a purse-net. They'll believe themselves to be just such men as we make'em, neither more nor less. They have nothing, not the use of their senses, but by tradition" (3.3.84-87). The relative ease with which the two characters are enlisted for the author-figures' purposes is testimony to their slavish adherence to the artificial construction of identity.

While the would-be poet and gallant are examples of manipulated identity, so too are the Ladies Collegiates. "They are bad actors," as Watson remarks, "not only in their intellectual pretensions, but even in the cosmetic make-up they wear" (107). Their use of cosmetics, rather than accentuating their natural appearance, succeeds only in pointing out the disparity between the roles they play and the ugliness and licentiousness which lie beneath. The page's song at the beginning of the play sets up a contrast

between genuine beauty and that which is imposed artificially. Beauty for these ladies is only an illusion:

Still to be neat, still to be dressed,  
As you were going to a feast;  
Still to be powdered, still perfumed:  
Lady, it is to be presumed,  
Though art's hid causes are not found,  
All is not sweet, all is not sound. (1.1.82-87)

Evidently, things are not as they would appear.

Perhaps Jonson's purposes in dealing with theatricality in society are clearer when one considers that he is attempting to portray his private-theatre audience on stage. The various types of people that Jonson mentions in his prologue (22-24) is, in fact, ". . . a warning," writes Duncan, "that the author had identified his audience and [is] determined to show it its face in a mirror" (168). The polite society which the collegiates have established is a reflection of Jonson's society perpetuating cultural and intellectual affectation. Jonson attacks them for their role-playing and lack of interest in cultivating the self. The first reference to them is made by Truewit when he mentions that these ladies ". . . call themselves the Collegiates, an order between courtiers and country-madams, that live from their husbands and give entertainment to all the Wits and Braveries o' the time, as they call 'em, cry down or up what they like or dislike in a brain or a fashion . . ." (1.1.68-71). They perform for each other and the rooms or parlours in which they gather constitute their



stage. Each member is an actress in her own right while also being an audience for the others. Their pretentiousness is in direct contrast with the centered and gathered selves which Jonson portrays so often in his verse. "The self," as Greene explains, "which is not at home paints, feigns, invents, gossips, alters its manner and passion as whim or necessity dictates" (331).

While taking on the parts of critics or connoisseurs of culture and fashion, these actresses allow themselves to give free play to their capricious opinions. Like Daw and La Foole, they are influenced and swayed according to social pressures. Truewit later comments: "Why, all their actions are governed by crude opinion, without reason or cause; they know not why they do anything; but as they are informed, believe, judge, praise, condemn, love, hate, and in emulation one of another, do all these things alike" (4.6.57-61). Although these ladies are criticized for their pretentiousness and later their licentiousness, as they seek Dauphine out for sexual purposes, Jonson obviously enjoyed displaying these kinds of figures on stage for the enjoyment of his audience. Each loses no opportunity to malign another as they fight for exclusive sexual rights of Dauphine. The speed with which their interest in cultural matters fades and reveals their true interests is, no doubt, hilarious.

In the same way that the Ladies Collegiates are ridiculous, Morose is obviously, as Greene suggests, a caricature of Jonson's conception of the centered self. In his unusual desire to create a world which is disciplined, solitary, and above all, silent, he comes to understand himself in the role of the self-sufficient Stoic figure. Even though the true Stoic would stand aloof and remain unmoved by life's happenings, unlike Morose, a Stoic did not believe in shutting out reality altogether. Morose unwittingly conveys how much he has perverted his father's advice on how to lead a Stoic lifestyle:

My father, in my education, was wont to advise me that I should always collect and contain my mind, not suffering it to flow loosely; that I should look to what things were necessary to the carriage of my life, and what not, embracing the one and eschewing the other. In short, that I should endear myself to rest and avoid turmoil, which now is grown to be another nature to me. (5.3.42-48)

Moreover, his house becomes a stage wherein he may play the part of a Stoic to its fullest. He directs his servant like a stage manager to make sure his set is complete. He asks that a quilt be placed on the outside of the door and on the stairs; that the locks and hinges of all the doors be oiled. Any violation of his self-constructed, silent set is met with visceral anger and idle threats of violence.

However, Morose's desire to play this part becomes, ultimately, comic. His absurd isolation is more an acute case of self-absorption than anything else. He desires to

reject the world of man and turn inward entirely to himself since, as he claims, "All discourses but mine own afflict me; they seem harsh, impertinent, and irksome" (2.1.3-4). As a strange turn of fate, "it is Morose's special torment to be visited on his wedding day by a houseful of young city sparks, posturing fools, and pretentious women of fashion" (Greene 335). Morose sees himself as the principal actor in a world which becomes his stage, yet it becomes apparent that the world as a larger stage intrudes itself upon his smaller one. The various parodies and caricatures of the theatricality present in elite society are evidence of the play's light and comic spirit.

The theatrical quality undeniably present in the action of Epicoene is more fully realized as the playhouse audience is presented with the existence of several smaller performances within the larger one. For the most part, Otter is an emasculated husband who is no more than an obsequious servant to his wife. Mrs. Otter herself states that their marriage contract requires his complete submission to her authority. Still, Otter possesses an inflated opinion of both himself and the reputation of his bull, bear, and horse. He claims that they are known all over England. As he proceeds to get drunk with his exclusively male audience around him, he acts out the role of the patriarch who can command his wife to cater to his needs and perform any number of domestic chores.

Accordingly, safe in his role, and the selfish pleasure it brings, he delivers a lengthy diatribe on his wife's function and character in her absence. "I confess, gentlemen," he boasts, "I have a cook, a laundress, a house-drudge, that serves my necessary turns . . . he's an ass that will be so uxurious to tie his affections to one circle . . . Wives are nasty, sluttish animals" (4.2.50-54).

Likewise, Mrs. Otter seeing herself degraded in front of Dauphine, Clerimont, and Truewit, attempts to vindicate herself by reaffirming her role as the authority in the relationship. Truewit, of course, restrains the increasingly livid Mrs. Otter from attacking her husband and thereby makes the scene more amusing for the audience in the theatre and on stage. Otter is subsequently forced out of his role as his wife beats him thoroughly for his transgression. Otter is reduced to a ridiculous figure yelling, "O, hold, good Princess. . . . Under correction, dear Princess" (4.2.99,104).

There are other characters in the dramatic world of the play who understand the world in terms of a stage where they themselves act and write plays. Truewit, as his name suggests, is a type of author-figure who delights in and capitalizes on the role-playing that society engenders. Much like Jonson himself, he understands the world for what it is, with all its egotism, vanity, and selfishness. Although the collegiate women depend upon cosmetics to hide

the ugliness and depravity below, Truewit praises social artifice only insofar as it works to heighten nature's inherent qualities. He says: "If she have good ears, show 'em; good hair, lay it out; good legs, wear short clothes; a good hand, discover it often; practice any art to mend breath, cleanse teeth, repair eyebrows, paint, and profess it" (1.1.97-100).

Truewit's attitude to artifice is already made apparent in his attitude to cosmetics. He seems to know not only the types of role-playing which individuals are inclined to pursue but also the methods by which they can be manipulated. Truewit's indulgence in theatricality is evident in his interpretation of the dynamics between men and women. That is to say, when courting a woman, this gallant maintains that a suitor is obliged to act. "Truewit advises Dauphine," claims Watson, "to win a woman by a temporary theatrical indulgence of her self-dramatizing fantasies" (101). Only in this way can a man be assured of winning a woman's favours. Truewit's words convey his preoccupation with the calculated and careful mask that will ensure success in the fight for a woman:

You must

approach them i' their own height, their own line  
 . . .

If she love wit, give  
 verses, though you borrow 'em of a friend, or buy  
 'em, to have good. If valor, talk of your sword,  
 and be frequent in the mention of quarrels, though  
 you be staunch in fighting. If activity, be seen o'  
 your Barbary often, or leaping over stools, for the  
 credit of your back. . . .

Admire her tires, like her in all fashions, compare  
 her in every habit to some deity, invent excellent  
 dreams to flatter her, and riddles; or, if she be a  
 great one, perform always the second parts to her:  
 like what she likes, praise whom she praises. . . .

(4.1.84-85, 87-91, 104-107)

A lover, in the world of Epicoene that is dominated by  
 artifice and social pressures, must prove to be a consummate  
 actor with both his lines memorized and an ability for  
 impromptu speech according to what the situation requires.

At several points in the play, Truewit himself  
 demonstrates his theatrical virtuosity. The parts which he  
 writes for himself, such as his performances in front of  
 Morose, show his ". . . mischievous delight in the play of  
 mind as an end in itself" (Duncan 182). In Act Two, Truewit  
 plays a page who has come to warn Morose about the dangers  
 of marriage. The actor's lines exaggerate the demands and  
 inconveniences implicit in wedlock. The little play  
 produces a marked effect on its audience as Morose is  
 reduced to a sweating and pathetic old man who must retire  
 to his bed to receive physic. The actor knows exactly how  
 his audience would react to the issues presented. In much  
 the same way in Act Three, Truewit takes advantage of

Morose's anger at Cutbeard over choosing the now very loquacious Epicoene. As Morose begins a series of curses upon his former associate, Truewit makes a game out of the situation in order to tease the old man. As each tries to outdo the other in zealously inventing the various kinds of misfortunes which a barber might encounter, the little play is raised to such a pitch that Morose is forced to stop while the other continues. Truewit enrages Morose to the point where he is willing to forgive Cutbeard rather than be subject to any more of this noise.

Truewit's theatrical talents extend beyond acting into the areas of directing and play-writing. He constructs, directs, and stage-manages two separate and self-contained plays in Morose's house using different actors. The first play involves Daw and La Foole and is designed to improve the collegiates' impression of Dauphine after he has been unduly slandered by the two fools. Their propensity for acting makes them perfect for this show and Truewit sets up the basic requirements for his "tragi-comedy." The absurd and hilarious nature of the scene is clear as each character readily accepts Truewit's idea that he has been slandered by the other. Accordingly, Truewit, the playwright, invents the methods by which each will exact his revenge. To requite Daw, La Foole is described as possessing infinite varieties of weapons to the point where he might well overrun an entire country. Likewise, Truewit

tells La Foole that Daw ". . . has sent for powder already, and what he will do with it, no man knows; perhaps blow up the corner o' the house where he suspects you are"

(4.5.190-192). Meanwhile, the collegiates, Epicoene and Trusty, have assembled in the gallery and enjoyed the play acted out in front of them. The fact that this episode so plainly recalls a scene from Twelfth Night helps to emphasize its self-conscious theatricality.

Truewit's other play, like all the rest, is no more than a manifestation of his penchant for simple fun. In order to vex Morose, he employs Otter and Cutbeard who assume their roles as a lawyer and divine (or priest) completely. Truewit's comments reveal his abilities in exploiting his actors' lack of identity:

O, I'll make the deepest divine and gravest lawyer  
out o' them two . . .

Clap but a civil gown  
with a welt o' the one, and a canonical cloak with  
sleeves o' the other, and give 'em a few terms i'  
their mouths, if there come not forth as able a  
doctor and complete a parson, for this turn, as may  
be wished, trust not my election. (4.7.40-41,43-47)

The director gives his cast their scripts, props, and costumes and anything else they might need for "opening night." He has done all that he can for them, and now it is up to them to do the rest. He tells his two leads to ". . . look to your parts now and discharge 'em bravely; you are well set forth, perform it as well" (5.3.10-12). At the same time, he advises them not to break character even if



they are hard pressed to remember their lines. "If you chance to be out," he says, "do not confess it with standing still or humming or gaping one at another, but go on and talk aloud and eagerly, use vehement action, and only remember your terms, and you are safe" (5.3.12-15).

However, Truewit's function in Epicoene is much more problematic when we examine the questionable use he makes of his theatrical talents. As admirable and witty as he might well appear, he is the type of author-figure against which Jonson must ultimately measure himself. The motives underlying Truewit's theatricality are questionable since, like Volpone, he engages himself in acting and writing plays for the sheer pleasure of doing so. While our admiration for Volpone is checked by the play's black background, we are naturally suspicious of Truewit to a lesser degree, because he is no more than a successful product of the trivial world in which he lives. His theatrical games are essentially purposeless and self-serving and these are exactly the moral issues which Jonson's own ironic art attempts to illustrate. "He is used," states Duncan, "not to shock or subvert moral judgement, but to induce a state of mind which dismisses the whole business of judging moral issues as a boring irrelevance, while delighting in the issues as an object of witty contemplation" (183). Jonson means to place his audience in the difficult position of

weighing Truewit's theatre of sheer delight against his questionable motivation.

The negative qualities of the play's comic spirit are also present when we consider the priorities of the three gallant figures. The play begins with Clerimont busying himself about his appearance in his dressing room. Clerimont's reaction to Truewit's advice concerning his wasting of time is interesting by what it reveals about his character:

Foh! Thou hast read Plutarch's Morals now, or some such tedious fellow, and it shows so vilely with thee, 'fore God, 'twill spoil thy wit utterly. Talk me of pins, and feathers, and ladies, and rushes, and such things; and leave this stoicity alone till thou mak'st sermons. (1.1.56-60)

Even Truewit's moral stance is qualified. "For the rest of the comedy," says Barton, "he occupies himself by fervently playing games, immersing himself in precisely that purposeless world of entertainment which he questions so sharply in his opening speeches to Clerimont" (122). The irony of Jonson's portrayal of these author-figures is, indeed, apparent as it seems that wit and ethical principles are incompatible.

The character of Dauphine is the other author-figure by which Jonson ironically measures himself. Truewit is forced to admit in the play's final scene that Dauphine has been one step ahead of anyone else in theatrical artifice, and it is to him that "the better half of the garland"

(5.4.200) is due. The calculating Dauphine has kept his plot a secret from his friends and he alone has had full intelligence of who Epicoene really is. Truewit's plays have been witty, but they are all subordinated by Dauphine's intricate masterplot. So if Truewit can be criticized for participating in purposeless drama, then Jonson perhaps suggests that Dauphine's dramatic designs are too purposeful. That is to say, Dauphine's use of theatricality is suspect because it is used only to advance his personal and material interests. Through his leading actor, Epicoene, Dauphine succeeds in bringing his uncle into agreement and, subsequently, assures himself of the inheritance which has, all along, been the sole object of his master play. The callousness with which Dauphine treats his uncle when his goal has been achieved at the end of the comedy is also another matter of concern which Jonson presents to his audience for their judgement.

Epicoene's final unmasking at the conclusion of the play is testimony to Jonson's evolving attitude toward the function of comedy. The identification of Epicoene's role becomes as surprising to the audience in the theatre as it is to those on stage. The world on stage reflects back on to the real world as Jonson illustrates how vulnerable we are to role-playing and acting. Having been witness to what is thought to be all the theatrical artifice occurring in the play, the dramatist still shakes his audience out of

their complacency. At the same time, the surprise ending amuses the audience so that their pleasure and involvement become part of the meaning of Epiccoene. Truewit's final appeal for the audience's applause reaffirms the play's mood of festivity: "Spectators, if you like this comedy, rise cheerfully, and now Morose is gone in, clap your hands. It may be that noise will cure him, at least please him" (5.4.222-224). However, this festive mood is tempered with Jonson's attempt to provide real insight into human behaviour in polite circles. It is this complex mixture of mirth and didacticism which Jonson hopes will remain with his spectators long after they have left the theatre. He writes in the Prologue: "Nor is it only while you keep your seat/Here that his feast will last, but you shall eat/A week at ord'naries on his broken meat . . ." (25-27).

In comparison to Volpone, Jonson's struggle to come to terms with his ethical and dramatic concerns in Epiccoene is more complex. Clearly, the conflict between moral absolutes and theatrical appeal is much stronger and more obvious in the earlier play. Here it is more subtly disguised and deceptive. It is the continuous and varied conflict between these two elements in Jonsonian comedy which makes the experience of it so meaningful. Jonson's desire to both criticize and dramatize his characters creates an interesting tension which makes the appeal of his plays particularly irresistible.

### CHAPTER THREE

"And all begin to act": The Alchemist

Despite its similarity to Volpone as a gulling comedy, Jonson's The Alchemist breaks new ground in attempting to tackle the problem of dramatic art. The theatrical metaphor within the play serves to point up Jonson's thinking about comedy, the value of the playwright, and the theatre for which he writes. As before, clever actor and author-figures create and act in various performances within the larger play itself to deceive the audiences they draw to their little playhouse. But this time, the dominating alchemical metaphor tells us more about Jonson's attitude to art. It makes plain that his primary concern in the play is with art, rather than with fashionable society (as in Epicoene) or with the threat of materialism to Christian values (as in Volpone).

The science of alchemy is based on the assumption that nature is imperfect, old, and deteriorating. All things in nature are imperfect but, with the help of alchemical art, it may proceed toward the perfect. Nature and art, then, are at odds with one another. The Cyclops' song at the beginning of Jonson's "Mercury Vindicated from the Alchemists at Court" shows his understanding of the

popular misconception of his day. Alchemy offers to redeem and reshape a fallen, natural world:

Soft, subtle fire, thou soul of Art  
 Now do thy part  
 On weaker Nature, that through age is lamed.  
 Take but thy time, now she is old,  
 And the Sun, her friend, grown cold,  
 She will no more in strife with thee be named.  
 (1-6)

Jonson chooses alchemy as a metaphor for examining his attitude toward comic art. He was well aware of the alchemy/theatre parallel and employed it as a means of defining his own role as a playwright and the value that his drama offered its spectators. Jonson, in fact, equates alchemical science with theatre that lacks substance. "The metaphorical relationship," as Sweeney suggests, "between theater and alchemy gave Jonson the chance to project onto the alchemists with vengeance whatever sense of imposture and insubstantiality he felt about his own professional role" (146).

Alchemy and the theatre which Face and Subtle offer, then, are both false arts which suggest the possibility that nature can be transformed and improved. Like the alchemist, these author-figures take base materials in human form and pretend to transform them into people of greater distinction. Theirs is a theatre of illusion which offers the tantalizing possibility of worldly success to its self-deluded audience.

Thus, it is precisely this form of false theatre and play-making offered by Subtle and Face by which Jonson must ultimately measure himself in The Alchemist. "To the Reader" which appears before the play itself suggests the manner in which the work must be interpreted. Indeed, it constitutes Jonson's warning that corrupt theatre only seeks to swindle its gullible and misguided audience by playing up to their self-interest. As in so many of Jonson's works which feature prologues and prefatory epistles, the advice contained within "To the Reader" becomes the standard by which everything in the play must be gauged. Here, he is asking that his audience retain their powers of discrimination against the onslaught of theatrical appeal:

If thou beest more, thou art an understander, and then I trust thee. If thou art one that tak'st up, and but a pretender, beware at what hands thou receiv'st thy commodity; for thou wert never more fair in the way to be cozened than in this age in poetry, especially in plays: wherein now the concupiscence of dances and antics so reigneth as to run away from Nature and be afraid of her is the only point of art that tickles the spectators.

(1-7)

Clearly, Jonson's art endeavors not to "run away from Nature and be afraid of her." Jonson's art, rather, attempts to join itself with nature. Unlike the alchemist or the false dramatist, Jonson's dramatic theory enhances and does not conceal or compete against the nature which it seeks to reflect. Jonson still sees himself as a morally responsible playwright who, by teaching as well as entertaining, offers,

as "The Argument" suggests, "wholesome remedies" (15) and "fair correctives" (18). Even though The Alchemist is a more genial play than any of its predecessors, Jonson attempts, in an ironic manner, to vindicate theatregoing as a significant activity.

In the same way that a single house acts as theatre in both Volpone and Epicoene, so too does Lovewit's home perform a similar function in The Alchemist. Unlike the other works, however, the actor and author-figures in this play depend upon their dramas to make a living. It is their prime source of income. In this light, the "venture tripartite" which Face, Subtle, and Dol establish has many close ties to Jonson's conception of the dynamics of the professional theatre for which he wrote. Sweeney suggests that, ". . . their venture is unquestionably theatrical in many of the ways any professional theatre is theatrical. Playwrights create and actors enact roles in the hope of stimulating an audience to part with its cash" (135). Again, "The Argument" holds a clue to the implicit relationship between acting and playwriting in The Alchemist and Jonson's thoughts concerning the financial considerations of a professional theatre company in his time. We are presented with



. . . C oz'ners at large; and only wanting some  
 H ouse to set up, with him they here contract  
 E ach for a share, and all begin to act.  
 M uch company they draw, and much abuse  
 I n casting figures, telling fortunes, news,  
 S elling of flies, flat bawdry, with the  
 stone;  
 T ill it, and they, and all in fume are gone.  
 (6-12)

We begin to recognize more fully that here, and to a lesser degree in the other plays examined in this study, the theatrical metaphor helps Jonson express his anxieties about the role of the stage in England at a time when theatre was becoming a business. Jonson naturally distrusted popular art since its main motivation was monetary and, therefore, fragile. In the unusually genial and permissive atmosphere of The Alchemist, these serious concerns can easily be overlooked.

Other details within the play illustrate the dramatist's preoccupation with theatre. The play's opening scene, in fact, resembles the usual backstage frenzy just prior to a performance (Watson 114). These are actors arguing back stage over personal and professional issues. The scene would probably have personal meaning for Jonson since it portrays the common battle of egos between actors which no doubt often occurred in productions of his other plays. Subtle complains about his having to carry the production practically by himself. This particular actor apparently feels that he has the lead role and that his pains are entirely warranted. However, the other two

members of the cast object to this rather large assumption. Face speaks out against Subtle's backstage bickering and the cast proceeds to debate their respective functions within the production:

FACE. 'Tis his fault;  
 He ever murmurs, and objects his pains,  
 And says the weight of all lies upon him.  
 SUBTLE. Why, so it does.  
 DOL COMMON. How does it? Do not we  
 Sustain our parts?  
 SUBTLE. Yes, but they are not equal.  
 DOL COMMON. Why, if your part exceed today,  
 I hope  
 Ours may tomorrow match it.  
 SUBTLE. Ay, they may.  
 DOL COMMON. "May," murmuring mastiff? Ay, and  
 do. Death on me!  
 [To Face.] Help me to throttle him. [Chokes  
Subtle.] (1.1.142-148)

While Dol argues that each member's part varies in importance from night to night, Subtle still maintains that he is the production's cornerstone. But if they are to put on their play, they must put aside their artistic and personal differences and become more professional by turning their attentions to their paying customers.

The opening scene also has importance for what it has to say about the question of role-playing and identity. The very nature of Face and Subtle's roles is worthy of examination in order to see what, if anything, lies behind them. In the opening quarrel, each character offers a rather detailed yet unflattering account of the other's condition prior to the play which they are about to put on. Jonson plays upon the acute disparity which exists between

who their roles suggest they are and who they are in actuality. Like actors, these two attempt to pass themselves off as people they are really not; in this case, a quack as a learned doctor and a pander as a captain. Their alliance, then, is purely pragmatic, as Hyland indicates, and the opening struggle for supremacy between the two actors can be evaluated in terms of what it has to say about the question of identity and the self (109). Subtle, for example, is quick to remind Face that he is no more than what his costume conveys him to be and, thus, he threatens to ". . . mar/All that the tailor has made . . ." (1.1.9-10). He claims to have given Face a role which is of greater value than he had in real life. "Yes. You were once . . . ," he claims, "the good,/Honest, plain, livery-three-pound-thrum . . ." since "by my means, translated suburb-Captain" (1.1.15-16,19).

Moreover, Subtle's arguments concerning his responsibility in forging Face's identity are particularly theatrical in nature. Not only does Subtle claim the position of lead actor in their theatre, he also claims for himself the part of casting director, producer, costume designer, and script-writer. He says:

Thou vermin, have I ta'en thee out of dung,  
 So poor, so wretched, . . .  
 Raised thee from brooms, and dust, and  
     wat'ring-pots?  
 Sublimed thee, and exalted thee, and fixed thee  
 I' the third region, called our state of grace  
     . . .  
 Put thee in words and fashion? made thee fit  
 For more than ordinary fellowships?  
 Giv'n thee thy oaths, thy quarreling dimensions  
     . . .  
 Made thee a second in mine own great art?  
 And have I this for thank!  
 (1.1.64-65,67-69,72-74,77-78)

According to his conception of things, this is a production entirely of his own creation. He is the driving-force and the brains behind this theatre.

Even though Subtle claims all this theatrical expertise, he is reminded, nevertheless, that he was discovered by Face raking through dung hills, constipated and starving. The fact that these descriptions differ so completely points to the large degree to which each character's conception of his role is inflated. Face, of course, claims the equal distinction of having provided the physical theatre and stage where this cast can perform. He has also provided room for all of Subtle's stage props and helped attract an audience. While Subtle represents a typical actor in Jonson's time, Face appears to be a kind of theatre manager-figure. Like the theatre managers of Jonson's time, Face fixes the repertory and brings in the public by advertising. He says:

. . . I ga' you count'nance, credit for your coals,  
 Your stills, your glasses, your materials,  
 Built you a furnace, drew you customers,  
 Advanced all your black arts; lent you,  
     beside,  
 A house to practise in-- (1.1.43-47)

In short, each accepts responsibility for the other's present state. So adamant are they now about maintaining their new roles, they become for each other only what they actually are for the theatre-audience--actors in a play. "They are, in short," writes Sweeney, "not persons, not even characters in the usual sense, but a series of dramatic roles which give meaning only in relation to whatever drama is at hand and whatever other roles they encounter" (153). Since their livelihood depends upon the success with which they maintain their roles in front of an audience, Jonson makes us aware of the precarious nature of role-playing.

Indeed, the various characters who come to Lovewit's house are audience-figures for whom the author and actor-figures write plays and perform. The presence of audience-figures in The Alchemist is further evidence that Jonson's use of the theatrical metaphor allows him to reflect his conception of the value of theatre in an ironic manner. In other words, the audience, as they are portrayed in the various plays-within-the-play come to the theatre as a means of satisfying their selfish and self-interested appetites. They are, in fact, the paying customers whom

Face, Subtle, and Dol must both delight and deceive through language and theatrical illusion. These gulls are only too willing to pay the clever authors and actors for the simple and selfish entertainment they experience through the various performances. The parallel between Jonson and his author-figures is clearer when one considers that he sought to delight and entertain his audiences with as much enthusiasm as they do. However, it is the motivation lying behind the theatrical artifice that constitutes the fundamental contrast between the two. The author-figures within the play lack any moral referent which might provide their audiences with some kind of insight or self-knowledge. Their interests, much like the false dramatists, Volpone and Mosca in Volpone and Truewit, Clerimont, and Dauphine in Epicoene, are purely selfish. Jonson, on the other hand, offers dramatic works which instruct and enlighten as well as entertain. The Alchemist, more than Volpone and Epicoene, represents a sustained and ironic metaphor for theatre and comic art. This concept gradually comes into focus as the audience-figures appear on stage.

The appearance of Dapper marks the first in a long line of characters who seek dramas which cater to their selfish appetites. We witness the author-figures' abilities in not only creating characters for themselves but also in constructing larger-than-life plays in which their clients see themselves as playing a central part. Much like Volpone

and Mosca, the two tricksters in this play maintain control of their performances by acting in and directing plays which capitalize on an audience's naive and romantic expectations. Clearly, these are the less scrupulous members of Jonson's audience whom he identifies in the Prologue. He writes of them:

If there be any that will sit so nigh  
 Unto the stream to look what it doth run,  
 They shall find things they'd think, or wish,  
   were done;  
 They are so natural follies, but so shown  
 As even the doers may see, and yet not own.  
(20-24)

Jonson is cognizant of the fact that the "follies" displayed in his comedy are so much a part of people's lives that some may not realize their implications. Unlike the alchemist who tries to cheat nature, Jonson seeks to show it in its true light. Accordingly, he asks that his spectators keep their wits about them so that they might come to recognize themselves on stage. As a comic dramatist, Jonson uses theatre to help those who commit these "natural follies" not only to see but also to acknowledge them as their own.

As Dapper appears, then, Face instructs Subtle to don the costume of an alchemist and get into character: "Seem you very reserved" (1.1.197). Dapper's character is further evidence that Jonson is portraying members of his own theatre-audience on stage. Anne Barton's comments attempt to place Dapper within this context. "Dapper

. . . ," she writes, "is a lawyer's clerk, a man bound to the office and a daily routine. But secretly he cherishes the idea of another existence, that of a gambler and haunter of ordinaries, a dashing rake and man about town" (138).

There were individuals like Dapper in Jonson's audience who nursed these kinds of idle fantasies and, thus, went to the theatre to live them out vicariously.

Moreover, the Dapper scene is a good example of how the "sugar-coated pill" theory of comedy does not accurately account for the appeal of Jonson's art. As much as he seeks to instruct, Jonson possesses an uncanny ability to infuse his scenes with extraordinary comic vigour. Thomas M. Greene identifies the peculiar relationship which the playwright has with his characters. He suggests: "A kind of witty complicity emerges occasionally from Jonson's treatment of his disguisers, to suggest that he was taken by their arts in spite of himself" (336). Face, in this particular scene, displays a brilliant awareness of Dapper's inflated conception of his own importance. Face plays the part of the defender of Dapper's honour, while at the same time Subtle feigns apprehension. The truly comic and satiric element of the little performance comes through as Face creates an ironically flattering picture of the lowly clerk. He is described as



. . . a special gentle,  
 That is the heir to forty marks a year,  
 Consorts with the small poets of the time,  
 Is the sole hope of his old grandmother,  
 That knows the law, and writes you six fair hands,  
 Is a fine clerk, and has his ciph'ring perfect,  
 Will take his oath o' the Greek Xenophon,  
 If need be, in his pocket, and can court  
 His mistress out of Ovid. (1.2.50-58)

The clerk cannot help but be flattered as he is portrayed as one who is rich, well-known, faithful to his family, well-read, and accomplished. The speech displays Face's skill at playing upon those petty attributes which the clerk has come to value in himself. Even as Subtle conveys his distrust of this enterprise because of the possible legal consequences, Face argues vehemently in favour of the clerk's honesty. Dapper in his credulity, is drawn in by the performance when he attempts to assuage the two quarrelers. Subtle accepts Dapper's money in a show of good faith in the clerk's honesty.

The deceptive skills of manipulation which these and other Jonsonian author-figures possess can partially account for our attraction to them. Originally, Dapper comes to the house for a spirit to use for occasional gambling situations. However, it is no time before he is convinced of the possibility of becoming an envied gallant who will ". . . win up all the money i' the town" and ". . . blow up gamester after gamester" (1.2.77,78). So convincing is the play that Dapper swears that he will leave the law altogether and pursue this false dream full time in the hope

of financial gain. The clerk is later convinced that he is related to the "Queen of Faery" and can be made to appreciate all the monetary benefits of his new-found family ties. He is the clearest example in the play of how an ignorant spectator can be seduced by the fantasies offered by false art.

Drugger is another character who helps to illustrate the theatrical and improvisational skills of Face and Subtle. Like Dapper, the tobacconist seeks an easier way to financial success. As his name would suggest, he pictures himself in the role of the model, middle-class London merchant. He requires Subtle's services to know the various ways by which he might assure himself of a thriving tobacco business. His questions concerning the placement of his door, shelves, boxes, and pots are so ridiculously idiotic that there is little doubt he will be swayed by the author-figures' performance. As with Dapper, Face becomes Drugger's agent. Here, Face demonstrates his improvisational abilities by adopting the tobacconist's rhetoric as a means of winning his confidence. Face gains the trust of "honest Abel" by regurgitating the conventional commercial values which Drugger has been trained to value in himself (Watson 118). He says:

. . . This is my friend, Abel, an honest fellow,  
 He lets me have good tobacco, and he does not  
 Sophisticate it with sack-lees or oil,  
 Nor washes it in muscadel and grains,  
 Nor buries it in gravel underground,  
 Wrapped up in greasy leather, or pissed  
 clouts,  
 But keeps it in fine lily pots that, opened,  
 Smell like conserve of roses, or French beans.  
 (1.3.22-29)

Subtle does his part by bewildering the merchant with alchemical jargon and advising him about the various spirits which will protect his stock. Face and Subtle work in tandem so that their audiences are convinced of almost anything. This is the power of theatrical appeal.

The appearance of Sir Epicure Mammon gives Jonson the opportunity to explore other issues within the confines of the theatrical metaphor. Even before he is actually on stage, Subtle's description of Mammon reflects the typical Jonsonian author-figure relishing his abilities at manipulating a gullible audience. Subtle mocks the knight's presumptuous role as public benefactor because Subtle himself has helped to forge his client's false dream. He declares:

Methinks I see him ent'ring ordinaries,  
 Dispensing for the pox; and plaguy houses,  
 Reaching his dose; walking Moorfields for lepers  
 . . .  
 Searching the 'spital, to make old bawds young;  
 And the highways for beggars to make rich.  
 I see no end of his labors. . . .  
 If his dream last, he'll turn the age to gold.  
 (1.4.18-20,23-25,29)

Unlike Dapper or Drugger, Sir Epicure Mammon needs little help in envisaging what his role might be with possession of the philosopher's stone. Even before Face and Subtle get the chance to perform in front of him, he has already transformed the world to suit the dictates of his desire.

Mammon, like Sir John Daw and Sir Amorous La Foole in Epicoene, is an actor who is tremendously self-conscious about his social position as a knight. Jonson is not simply satirizing a self-deluded individual. He is also conscious of the idea of public performance inherent in the Renaissance gentleman's role in society. His incessant verbal wanderings reflect the mind of a Renaissance self-fashioner reshaping his reality according to his perception of it. The world is reduced in size and it becomes his alone to master. He says to Surly:

Come on, sir. Now you set your foot on shore  
 In Novo Orbe; here's the rich Peru,  
 And there within, sir, are the golden mines,  
 Great Solomon's Ophir! He was sailing to 't  
 Three years, but we have reached it in ten months.  
 This is the day wherein, to all my friends,  
 I will pronounce the happy word, "Be Rich."

(2.1.1-7)

His transparent role as public benefactor and world conqueror helps to fulfill his desire for honour and respect. The incessant flow of words, images, and fantasies exposes him as an actor in society intending to achieve an effect upon his audience.

Coupled with Jonson's recognition that this kind of self-dramatization and posturing was integral to court-life, and that even he himself had engaged in it by fashioning his own role as court-poet, was his need to satirize it and expose its folly. Mammon's intentions are initially large-scale and altruistic. With the aid of the philosopher's stone, not only will he ". . . confer honor, love, respect, long life;/Give safety, valure, yea, and victory,/To whom he will" (2.1.50-52), but more than this, he will restore the old to potent youth, cure all diseases and even ". . . fright the plague/Out o' the kingdom in three months" (2.1.68-69). After Mammon's speech to Surly, Face enters as Lungs in Act Two, Scene Two and declares that the final stage in the creation of gold is only three hours away. It is at this point, when Mammon is sure that the stone will be his, that his ambitions take on a distinctly narrower vision. Any claims to humanitarian action on his part are discredited as the knight's worldly concerns reveal the self-interested sensualist within. Just as the disparity between Dapper's need to play the role of an honest man and his covetous desire for wealth becomes clear, so too does a similar contrast appear with regard to Mammon. To be sure, his elaborate conception of his place in the world dwindles into nothing more than a masked desire for material and personal gratification. The appeal of Mammon's character is undeniable as Jonson makes him both abhorrent

in his lustful designs and ridiculous in his Marlovian imagination.

Throughout the comedies which are being examined in this study, Jonson employs the theatrical metaphor and plays-within-the-play to present his ideas concerning the value of substantial theatre. Subtle's performance as a devout and holy man of alchemical science in front of Mammon and Surly in Act Two, Scene Three conveys many of the same issues involving theatre which Jonson had previously explored in the Scoto play in Volpone. Subtle becomes, like Scoto, a parodic version of Jonson himself as a playwright. In addition to using his appearance as a holy man of science to persuade his spectators, Subtle uses language to convince his public of his authenticity and honest intentions. Subtle's is a language used for its own sake and intended only to impress. He employs alchemical language devoid of any kind of substance. It is a language of persuasion or jargon by which this author-figure dupes his unsuspecting audience. Subtle's little dialogue with Face reinforces the notion that language within The Alchemist is merely a script; rhetoric used not to inform but to convince, persuade, and even confuse:

SUBTLE. Look well to the register,  
And let your heat still lessen by degrees,  
To the aludels.

FACE. [Within.] Yes, sir.

SUBTLE. Did you look  
O' the bolt's-head yet?

FACE. [Within.] Which? On D, sir?

SUBTLE. Ay,  
What's the complexion?

FACE. [Within.] Whitish.

SUBTLE. Infuse vinegar,  
To draw his volatile substance and his tincture,  
And let the water in glass E be filtered  
And put into the gripe's egg. Lute him well  
And leave him closed in balneo. (2.3.33-41)

This is merely jargon used to impress an audience and give the false impression that those who employ it are well-intentioned and knowledgeable.

Both Mammon and Surly are the audience-figures who witness this play, and their reactions are important since they afford insight into Jonson's thinking concerning language in theatre. Mammon, as we have come to see him, is so self-deluded in the first place that he can be convinced of anything. Since the description of the alchemical process, with reference to all the apparatus and elements, is spoken with such intense detail and immediacy, the gullible knight is easily convinced of its actuality. He becomes a willing and attentive audience, much like Sir Politic Wouldbe in Volpone, who is seduced by the play's sheer theatrical appeal. He complements Dapper by showing that ignorant spectators can be found in all levels of society.

Surly, on the other hand, represents the more critical side of Jonson's theatre-going audience. He provides the point of reference within the play by which Subtle's performance must be measured. The play is intended more for his benefit than it is for Mammon's since the knight has already demonstrated his credulity. Surly, then, is the skeptic who resists the lectures on alchemy from both Mammon and Subtle. Like Peregrine in Volpone, Surly expresses his suspicion of a theatrical language that is really only a game which attempts to swindle its spectators. Surly, in fact, identifies this fraudulent language for what it really is--terminology without substance. He throws back these empty terms in Subtle's face:

SURLY. Pray you, sir, stay.  
 Rather than I'll be brayed, sir, I'll believe  
 That alchemy is a pretty kind of game,  
 Somewhat like tricks o' the cards, to cheat a man  
 With charming.

SUBTLE. Sir?

SURLY. What else are all your terms,  
 Whereon no one o' your writers 'grees with other?  
 Of your elixir, your lac virginis,  
 Your stone, your med'cine, and your chrysosperm,  
 Your sal, your sulphur, and your mercury,  
 Your oil of height, your tree of life, your blood,  
 Your marchesite, your tutie, your magnesia,  
 Your toad, your crow, your dragon, and your panther,  
 Your sun, your moon, your firmament, your adrop,  
 Your lato, azoch, zernich, chibrit, heautarit,  
 And then your red man, and your white woman,  
 With all your broths, your menstrues, and materials  
 Of piss, and egg-shells, women's terms, man's blood,  
 Hair o' the head, burnt clouts, chalk, merds, and  
 clay,  
 Poulder of bones, scalings of iron, glass,  
 And worlds of other strange ingredients,  
 Would burst a man to name? (2.3.178-198)



Subtle claims that these words are used to obscure the alchemist's art and protect it from the ignorant, and yet there is no real substance at the centre of it. Surly helps to make the parallel between the false science of alchemy with its extremely large repertoire of meaningless terms and Jonson's conception of unsubstantial theatre.

Undoubtedly, Jonson is making a stand against a shoddy theatre which plays up to an audience's susceptibility to deception and bewilderment through language. The play-within-the-play which features Subtle, Mammon, and Surly, then, is an ironic reinforcement of the importance and value of meaningful language in Jonsonian drama. He expects his audience to be alert in the exercise of their critical judgement. In other words, they must be conscious of the ironic discrepancy between Jonson's own theories about the purposes of his art and the type of questionable theatricality which occurs within the play itself. Once again, "To the Reader" provides a guide to the proper interpretation of events in the play. Jonson displays his contempt for false authors like Subtle who employ language merely for effect. These authors are

. . . presumers on their own naturals, as they are deriders of all diligence that way, and, by simple mocking at the terms, when they understand not the things, think to get off wittily with their ignorance? Nay, they are esteemed the more learned and sufficient for this by the many, through their excellent vice of judgment. (9-14)

Jonson is perhaps never clearer about the differences between the writers of inferior drama and himself:

. . . But I give thee this warning, that there is a great difference between those that (to gain the opinion of copy) utter all they can, however unfitly, and those that use election and a mean. For it is only the disease of the unskillful to think rude things greater than polished, or scattered more numerous than composed. (27-32)

Words used for their own sake deceive, confuse, or merely impress, whereas those carefully chosen and placed help to instruct and delight.

While the *Subtle* play shows Jonson's contempt for the factors which threaten the theatre from within, other plays-within-the-play serve his purposes for his attack on issues which discredit it from without. The play featuring Ananias and Tribulation Wholesome gives the playwright an opportunity to satirize the criticism which the Puritans levelled at the theatre as an institution in England--that it told lies and encouraged sin. He exposes their hypocritical piety so that the effects of their arguments against the stage might be reduced. A more sustained attack upon the hypocritical Puritan is evident in the figure of Rabbi Zeal-of-the-land Busy in Bartholomew Fair.

We are presented initially with the simple-minded and downright Ananias. He, unlike most of Jonson's Puritans, is not an actor, so *Subtle* cannot encourage him in his role. Rather, *Subtle* bullies him through alchemical jargon and he leaves to fetch his teacher, Tribulation

Wholesome. Tribulation, on the other hand, is the classic example of the hypocrite actor-figure who is willing to bend his principles and play any role to achieve his ends. He is a master of rationalization as he gladly interprets Subtle's actions as ". . . part of a divine drama to test the Puritans with martyrdom in this world and thereby redeem them for the next" (Watson 120). He states with self-righteousness:

These chastisements are common to the Saints,  
And such rebukes we of the Separation  
Must bear, with willing shoulders, as the trials  
Sent forth to tempt our frailties. (3.1.1-4)

As Wholesome's dialogue with Ananias reveals, Jonson was angered at the Puritan who can justify any means, no matter how secular, to attain an apparently holy cause:

TRIBULATION. Good brother, we must bend unto  
all means  
That may give furtherance to the holy cause.  
ANANIAS. Which his cannot: the sanctified  
cause  
Should have a sanctified course.  
TRIBULATION. Not always necessary.  
The children of perdition are oft times  
Made instruments even of the greatest works.  
Beside, we should give somewhat to man's nature  
. . . (3.1.11-17)

The pastor possesses an incredible facility to put Ananias' arguments against their enterprise into perspective.

The hypocrisy inherent in the pastor's words is soon put into practice. The avarice and greed which lie beneath his hypocritical piety is revealed as both characters listen closely to how the philosopher's stone will help them

acquire money. They both become ridiculous figures when Ananias squabbles over such petty details as religious terms, tradition, bells, and psalms while at the same time, they are in complete agreement with the fraudulent practices which Subtle suggests. Tribulation here is forced to swallow criticism of the Puritans in much the same way as Voltore is forced to swallow insults to the legal profession by Mosca. These gulls are finally convinced that they will be both spiritual and temporal lords with the power to buy colonies around the world. Ultimately, the attack on the Puritans is Jonson's defense of the theatre by demonstrating the frailties and shortcomings of those who clamoured for its suppression.

The Alchemist, indeed, does say a great deal about Ben Jonson's view of himself as a playwright, his ambitions for his own art and the proper value of the theatre. In addition, the play also marks a critical development in his thinking concerning comedy. He places within the play several surrogates for the theatre-audience. These are characters who embody Jonson's conception of the way in which his audiences have come to interpret his comedies. Surly, for example, is the only visitor to Lovewit's house who appears not to have fallen prey to the theatrical chicanery that has been taking place all along. He is critical of the exploitative theatre within Lovewit's house and, as such, he is expected to expose the fraud. However,

he is a trickster himself and in his feeling of jealousy, he attempts to unmask the author-figures by joining their world of acting and play-writing. His Spanish costume and language, so he thinks, will allow him to outflank Face and Subtle. Although he revels in his early success at uncovering the "nest of villainies," his efforts to impose the world of morality upon this completely theatrical world only demonstrates their incompatibility.

Moreover, Face is allowed to slip away and use his theatrical power over his former audiences to beat the naive and ineffectual Surly. Because of his Spanish costume, Face encourages Drugger to interpret him as a rival for Dame Pliant, Kastril to see him as a quarreling enemy, and Ananias to view him as a Catholic spy and, therefore, a Satanic enemy to be despised (Watson 130). Rather than putting a stop to the theatrics by injecting morality into the play, Surly is simply overcome and laughed off stage. He is, ultimately, no match for the theatrical appeal of Face and Subtle.

Even the dim-witted neighbours of Lovewit are used as surrogates for the theatre-audience. They have seen and heard all the various characters come and go out of the house. Their unanimous testimony makes the truth of the situation difficult to deny:

LOVEWIT. Has there been such resort, say you?  
 1 NEIGHBOR. Daily, sir.  
 2 NEIGHBOR. And nightly, too.  
 3 NEIGHBOR. Ay, some as brave as lords.  
 4 NEIGHBOR. Ladies, and gentlewomen.  
 5 NEIGHBOR. Citizen's wives.  
 1 NEIGHBOR. And knights.  
 6 NEIGHBOR. In coaches.  
 2 NEIGHBOR. Yes, and oyster-women.  
 1 NEIGHBOR. Beside other gallants.  
 3 NEIGHBOR. Sailors' wives.  
 4 NEIGHBOR. Tobacco men.  
 5 NEIGHBOR. Another Pimlico! (5.1.1-6)

They cannot but believe the evidence of their senses. And yet, Face again manages to persuade them otherwise. Since they cannot admit to having seen Face because he had grown a beard, and because he denies their charges so persuasively, they also demonstrate how theatrical illusion can overcome truth.

Of course, if any character within The Alchemist is expected to expose all the histrionics that have been taking place throughout, it is surely Lovewit. Like the avocatori in Volpone, Lovewit represents the final authority who must act as judge. Unlike the avocatori, however, Lovewit has a penchant for wit rather than justice. He claims: "I love a teeming wit as I love my nourishment" (5.1.16) and, accordingly, he indulges the wit which the avocatori show no sign of being able to appreciate. His indulgence and lack of judgement leaves him open to willingly accept Face's theatrics. He aligns himself with Face as he dons the Spanish garb and marries Dame Pliant.

On a symbolic level, Lovewit represents Jonson's misguided and misinformed audience. He embodies the kind of indulgence which Jonson felt his audience desired. Rather than censuring the theatrical deception in the play, Lovewit simply asserts the importance and centrality of his own pleasure:

Therefore, gentlemen,  
 And kind spectators, if I have outstripped  
 An old man's gravity, or strict canon, think  
 What a young wife and a good brain may do:  
 Stretch age's truth sometimes, and crack it too.  
 (5.5.152-156)

We have now travelled a great deal beyond the moral ending in Volpone. Here it is wit and selfish pleasure, not moral considerations, which triumph in the end. As a surrogate for the audience, Lovewit's lack of judgement reflects back on to them. Jonson is playing an ironic game on his audience by serving them the kind of permissive comedy that they really desire. Jeremy's concluding speech, then, makes a final assumption that we as an audience will be as permissive in our judgement as Lovewit:

Gentlemen,  
 My part a little fell in this last scene,  
 Yet 'twas decorum. And though I am clean  
 Got off from Subtle, Surly, Mammon, Dol,  
 Hot Ananias, Dapper, Druggier, all  
 With whom I traded; yet I put myself  
 On you, that are my country; and this pelf  
 Which I have got, if you do quit me, rests,  
 To feast you often, and invite new guests.  
 (5.5.157-165)

Face, of course, has escaped from the audiences he has swindled. Similarly, he asks that we as the real

theatre-audience acquit him of his crime as well. Our applause at the end, then, would suggest that we do, in fact, condone his theatrical chicanery and audiences after us will do the same. The fact that we allow theatrical appeal to triumph over moral concerns implies that Jonson is taking a very ironic view of comedy. Even as we capitulate along with Lovewit to the irresistible high spirits and sheer fun of this play, we must suppose that Jonson means us to remain alert to where his comedy has taken us. While The Alchemist does appear to champion simple wit and fun, Jonson's intentions are otherwise. We are still required to respond intelligently and critically to every action which passes on stage. We have been carried to a point where our powers of discrimination are put to the test by a morally consistent dramatist.



## CONCLUSION

The presence of the theatrical metaphor in the comedies Volpone, Epicoene, and The Alchemist gives Ben Jonson the opportunity to explore the value of theatre and his place within it as a playwright. Author, actor, and audience-figures appear in various smaller performances within the larger ones and thereby reflect Jonson's concerns for his own dramatic art. Jonson actively sought to vindicate theatre-going as a respectable social activity by writing plays which both instruct as well as entertain.

Within these comedies, we are presented with characters who are purely self-interested. Engaging in dramas of pretense and illusion, these author and actor-figures' sole object is to deceive audiences by theatrical means. They delight in writing plays and creating roles for themselves to act. Whether it is for simple pleasure or to accumulate money, these playwrights construct dramas of manipulation which cater to the self-serving desires of their audiences. They seek neither to reform nor to instruct through drama but simply to use theatricality to achieve their own goals.

The theatre which Jonson portrays in his three comedies is unsubstantial and irresponsible. It draws to itself misinformed and unintelligent audience-figures who

are falsely convinced of its legitimate value. This theatre of deception, then, is one by which Jonson comes to measure himself as a morally purposeful dramatist. In fact, the plays-within-the-play constitute ironic representations of Jonson's theories as they pertain to his conception of the nature and function of drama. Even though gullible audiences are swindled by theatrical appeal, Jonson's actual intentions are quite otherwise. For him, the theatre provided a setting in which he could present ethical issues which challenged the judgement of his audiences. The individual's failure to establish himself on a moral basis, his tendency toward role-playing, social affectation, and subversive behaviour are presented on stage in a curious manner. Rather than serving up an unequivocal moral message to his audience, Jonson sought to complicate the spectator's ability to judge clearly. Upon the audience of Jonsonian comedy is cast the interesting problem of reconciling the moral message inherent in his use of the theatrical metaphor and the delightful wit which infuses its dramatic presentation.

The continuous and varied conflict between Jonson's ethical and artistic concerns creates a tension which makes his comedy meaningful. Clearly, he not only felt the critical need to teach through his drama but also acknowledged the demands of an audience who came to the playhouse merely to be entertained. Consequently, he was

forced to reconcile his desire to maintain high moral standards with an ever-increasing compulsion to write successful and popular comedy. What arises out of this dilemma, then, is the uneasy synthesis between Jonson the moralist and Jonson the artist.

Jonson's comedies are written in such a way that against our better judgement we are attracted to the theatrical tricksters because he infuses them with immense comic vitality and creative energy. They are performers who excel at drama which is both planned and improvisational. Since they involve themselves in deception, they ought to incur more censure than they do. As an audience, we cannot help but admire them as we become caught up in their subversive actions. It is my opinion that this kind of friction is deliberate. We as an audience are supposed to experience this tension, which is precisely what, for Jonson, gives his comedies moral significance. His purpose was to place this kind of ethical dilemma before the playhouse audience. The nature of the spectator's experience in the theatre becomes complex and thought-provoking.

The comedies that are examined in this study also provide testimony to Jonson's evolving attitude toward comedy. As he developed as a dramatist, he was able to adapt his comic practice to express his moral ideals more effectively. Increasingly, Jonson was able to devise

stratagems that allowed him to placate the less discriminating members of his audience while at the same time adhering to his first principles. In these middle comedies, especially after Volpone, the ethical paradigms so explicitly present in former works are conspicuously less present; they gradually slip surreptitiously into the background. This progression, however, does not point to the idea that Jonson was abandoning his moral stance and capitulating to the demands of his audience. Nor does it suggest that he was consciously championing theatrical appeal over pedagogy. The move away from explicit morality does not necessitate its disappearance but reinforces the tension between it and its more pleasurable elements. We as an audience must increasingly apply moral judgement to the theatricality which triumphs in the plays. As standards of judgement become less conspicuous within the plays, it is incumbent upon the audience to apply them from without.

The progression of Jonson's thoughts concerning the nature of comic drama from Volpone through Epicoene to The Alchemist is quite evident. Volpone presents a severe contrast between ethical standards and theatrical appeal. Against the black issues of avarice, rape, and the perversion of conventional values, the author and actor-figures perform with admirable wit. The result is a play wherein didacticism clashes openly with theatrical genius. In Epicoene, the conflict between the two elements

in Jonson's comic theory becomes much more disguised and insidious. The play itself, as it examines social affectation, has a decidedly lighter tone than the previous work. The moral issues of role-playing and the forging of identity are handled with delightful levity. The Alchemist finally takes this progression away from open moralizing one step further. It is the most free-spirited of the three comedies. In its ending, quite unlike that of Volpone, theatrical wit and selfish pleasure seem to prevail.

To the extent that his comedies appear to owe their success to the triumph of theatrical over moral values, Jonson could be seen as deceiving his audiences by giving them exactly what they wanted. It seems wiser, however, to credit him with retaining a sense of moral responsibility. By increasingly disguising his didactic aims, and exploiting his sense of theatre to the full, he was able to cultivate the good will of the audiences whose values he was systematically and seriously probing.

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