

## Of Mire and Authorship

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We know much more about the early performances of Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* than we do about the average Jacobean play. It was first acted at the new Hope Theatre, 31 October 1614, then at court before King James I the very next night, on All Saints' Day, 1 November 1614. Despite this auspicious double première, however, the play was not included in Jonson's monumental 1616 *Works*; *Bartholomew Fair* had to wait until 1640 to be issued as part of his second volume of *Works*, although it had evidently been printed under the aging Jonson's supervision as early as 1631, the date given on its title page within the 1640 volume.

In its 1640 printed form, the play is hedged about with a bristling fence of explanatory materials that link it to the occasion of its first performances. The title page announces that it was 'acted in the year, 1614. By the Lady Elizabeth's Servants. And then dedicated to King James, of most blessed memory; by the author, Benjamin Jonson'. The text itself is prefaced first by a verse 'Prologue to the King's Majesty' that probably introduced the play for the 1614 performance at court, and second by a prose 'Induction on the stage' presumably performed at the Hope Theatre for the full run of the play. It is followed by the verse 'Epilogue' printed at the end of the text, addressed to James I, and presumably performed along with the Prologue at Whitehall. We have no way of knowing, of course, what changes Jonson may have made in any of these texts between the time of composition and their much later publication. He frequently altered performance materials for print and may well have polished these, though it is most unlikely that he invented them after the fact. Even by Jonsonian standards, the text of *Bartholomew Fair* is accompanied by a large number of ancillary materials: no other play published in the first or second volume of the *Works* can boast a title-page dedication, a prologue and an epilogue to the king, although the others often carry dedications and introductions of various kinds. Why, we may ask, did Jonson choose to surround *Bartholomew Fair* in particular with such an array of supplementary texts?

One possible answer might be that he felt uneasy about the play's sprawling licence. In *Bartholomew Fair* the audience, whether viewers or readers, is treated to a highly charged, high cholesterol diet of roast pig and punk (both

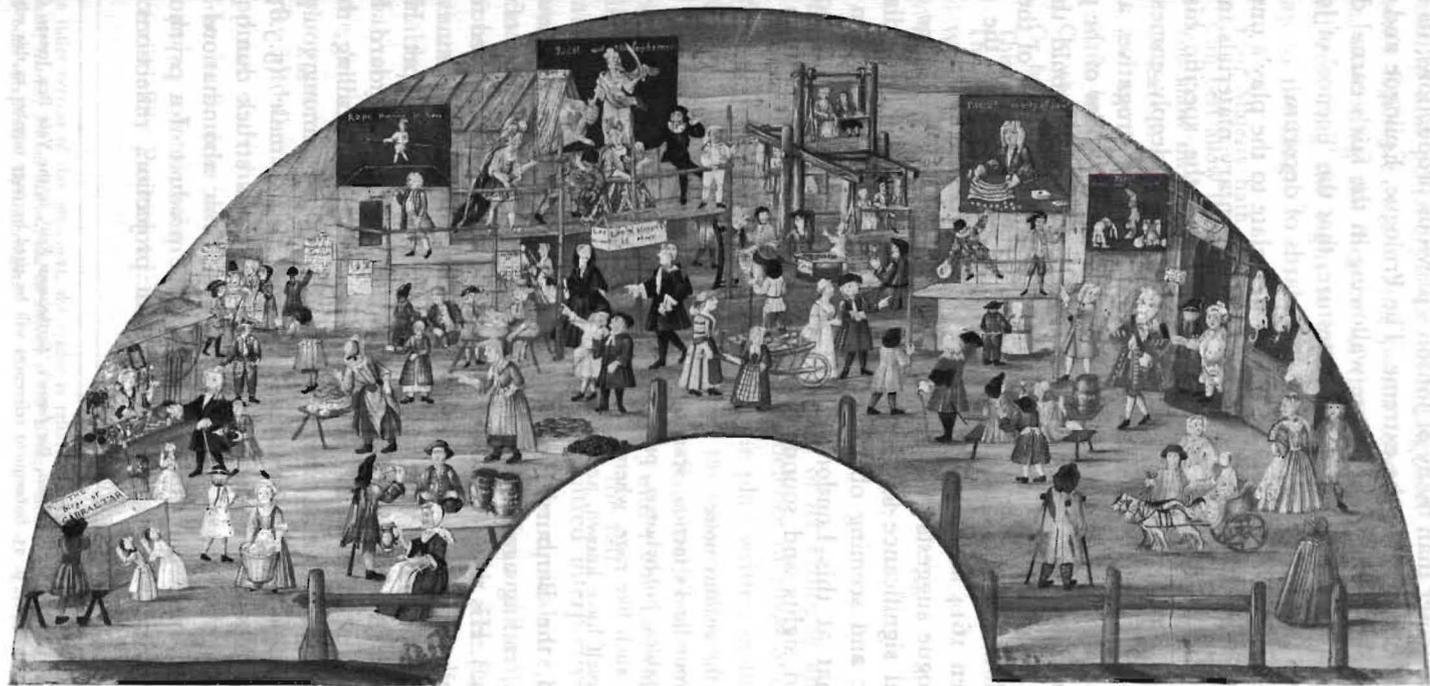


Plate 11 An aquatint of a fan picture published by J. F. Setchel purporting to depict Bartholomew Fair in 1721

piping hot), gingerbread, vapours, and other vanities of the fair. The play's form is much looser than many of Jonson's previous productions; its subject matter is carnivalesque in the extreme. The Prologue, Epilogue and Induction steer readers away from a mere wallowing in the fair's carnal delights by suggesting, in a typically Jonsonian gesture, that the 'licence' of Jonson's *Smithfield* be measured against higher standards of decorum.

But a second answer to our question might relate to the play's unusually prominent topicality. The title page and supplementary materials included along with the printed play-text alert readers to the specific historical moment of its double première in 1614. The play is deeply enmeshed in early Jacobean struggles over law, licence and royal prerogative, and the Prologue, Epilogue and Induction invite the 'judicious' reader of the printed text to a complex set of historical reconstructions: what would the play have meant to its original audience at court or at the opening of the Hope Theatre? How would its political signification be altered by the gap in time between 1614 and 1631 or 1640?

The Prologue suggests that the playwright expected *Bartholomew Fair* to have special significance for James I, who was known for his dislike of the rhetoric and seeming obstinacy of Puritan separatists. Jonson warns the king that at this London fair, his majesty can anticipate not only the expected sights and sounds, but also the expected opposition to his authority:

the zealous noise  
Of your land's faction, scandalised at toys,  
As babies, hobbyhorses, puppet plays,  
And such like rage, whereof the petulant ways  
Yourself have known, and have been vexed with long.<sup>1</sup>

And indeed, the Banbury Puritan, Zeal-of-the-Land Busy, follows this prescription, railing against the vanities of the fair as the 'shop of Satan' (3.2.38, p. 92). His thunderous volley of vituperation is interrupted temporarily by orgiastic self-abandonment to the fair's forbidden pleasures of ale and roast pig, then definitively in the debate with the puppet. His Jeremiads against the 'Dagon' of puppetry recapitulate standard Puritan arguments against the stage: the puppets have no lawful calling, they are profane, and they are an abomination because 'the male among you putteth on the apparel of the female, and the female of the male' (5.5.87–8, p. 181). In his debate with Puppet Dionysius, Busy is struck dumb by the realisation that the puppet has no sex: the demonic abominations he has found in the puppet play and the fair are the product of a psychological phenomenon that we moderns would term projection, reflections of his

<sup>1</sup> Cited from Eugene M. Waith's edition, *Ben Jonson's 'Bartholomew Fair'*, in the *Yale Ben Jonson* (1963; 3rd printing, New Haven, 1971), p. 23. Subsequent references will be cited by page number to this edition.

own strong but suppressed hunger for the pleasures of sacramentalism, idol worship and polymorphous self-indulgence.<sup>2</sup>

Jonson's Epilogue to the king points toward the same line of political critique, overriding the 'licence' of the Puritan and other enemies of the fair and restoring the right to adjudicate and reform both the fair and the play to the king:

Your Majesty hath seen the play, and you  
 Can best allow it from your ear and view.  
 You know the scope of writers, and what store  
 Of leave is given them, if they take not more,  
 And turn it into licence. You can tell  
 If we have used that leave you gave us well;  
 Or whether we to rage or licence break,  
 Or be profane, or make profane men speak.  
 This is your power to judge, great sir, and not  
 The envy of a few. Which if we have got,  
 We value less what their dislike can bring,  
 If it so happy be, t'have pleased the King.

(p. 187)

If *Bartholomew Fair* is interpreted in terms of its Prologue and Epilogue, it can easily be read as a *tour de force* in defence of royal authority. As I argued in an extended interpretation of the play written in the late 1970s and published later in *The Politics of Mirth*, the play constructs an elaborate set of equivalences between Bartholomew Fair, under the control of the City of London, and the Jacobean theatre, under the control of James I and cleverly presented as coterminous with the fair.

What Jonson has done from this court-centred interpretive standpoint is to create a symbolic space that establishes the equivalence of two forms of entertainment, a space for the airing, contestation and eventual silencing of various systems of authority that rivalled the king's. The Puritan claims to be better able to judge than the monarchy between wholesome and abominable pastimes; Justice Adam Overdo, a caricature of a London alderman or justice of the peace, similarly claims preeminent jurisdiction over the 'enormities' of the fair. Both of them caricature Puritan and judicial opponents of James I's efforts in 1614 and after to extend royal authority into the area of plays and pastimes by overriding local attempts to suppress such harmless 'mirth'. The very habits of speech of the would-be authorities over the fair echo the rhetoric of opponents of the king's policy of toleration for 'public mirth'. Busy's ranting parodies a characteristically Puritan trick of style: the quasi-Hebraic use of repetitive

<sup>2</sup> For a fuller version of this argument, the reader is referred to ch. 2 of Leah S. Marcus, *The Politics of Mirth: Jonson, Herrick, Milton, Marvell, and the Defense of Old Holiday Pastimes* (Chicago, 1986), which the present essay will both recapitulate and interrogate.

clauses with amplification, as in the Psalms in particular; Overdo's elaborately structured rhetoric echoes the contemporary Ciceronianism associated with civic and parliamentary debate.

The Puritan and the justice are symbolically silenced in the play by the scriptural doctrine of *tu quoque*: Jonson exposes them as blinded by 'beams' while presuming to cast out the 'motes' in others' eyes; their own enormities turn out to be more dangerous to community and commonwealth than those they rail against. Having displayed the moral bankruptcy of rival authorities during the play, in the Epilogue Jonson symbolically restores authority over both play and fair to the king: the Epilogue on the printed page appears precisely where James I's servant the Master of Revels would ordinarily affix his seal permitting the play to be acted. *Bartholomew Fair* in its printed form thus functions as a powerful argument to justify and extend royal power into contested legal and religious areas. Particularly toward the end of the play, there are strong echoes of the liturgy for the Feast of St Bartholomew, one of the official feast days of the Church of England. These echoes seem to lend divine authority to the royal surveillance over the fair and over the play Jonson posits as coterminous with it. One could scarcely ask for a more forceful argument in defence of royal prerogative powers.

At the time that I constructed this argument in 1978, I was quite pleased with it. And indeed, its emphasis on viewing the play from the perspective of the monarchy was characteristic of historicist criticism from the mid- to late sixties and early seventies. Since then, however, the dominant historical models invoked by literary critics have become less court-centred; like the revisionist history on which they are based, they place – or at least should place – less emphasis on contestation and more on a broad range of political and ecclesiastical allegiances between the extremes of absolutism and nonconformity. My perspective on the play has altered accordingly, not because I consider the earlier argument to be incorrect, but because it is too narrow and rigid as interpretation, and posits too narrow an audience – perhaps an audience of one in the person of James himself. Despite Jonson's many strong ties to James I, he kept up a wide and varied network of friendships and allegiances. Some of his chief patrons, such as Lucy, countess of Bedford, were Puritan sympathisers. Jonson's readers in 1640 and after were encouraged by the framing Prologue and Epilogue to read the play in terms of its caricature of the Puritan, its affirmation of royal authority over plays and pastimes. Ironically, however, by that late date royal authority was shaky indeed. Busy's anti-theatrical sentiment was coming to predominate – within two years of the publication of Jonson's second volume of *Works* the theatres would be closed. Amidst the opening skirmishes of the Civil War, Jonson's confident appeal to the judgement of the long-dead James I must have rung hollow indeed.

Nor, in the absence of Prologue and Epilogue, would Jonson's earlier audiences in the Hope Theatre in 1614 and after have received the court-centred *Bartholomew Fair* in quite its full 'authority'. We have some evidence that Jonson designed the Induction performed before this audience to stimulate some of the same drawing of equivalences already suggested above between the institution of the theatre, under the authority of the king, and the institution of the St Bartholomew pleasure fair, under the authority of the City of London. The Prompter in the Induction is the author's legal representative, offering a mock-serious contract with the audience that sets limits on their freedom to judge it. At the end of the Induction, the Prompter notes that the author has observed a 'special decorum', the Hope Theatre being 'as dirty as Smithfield, and as stinking every whit'. But he also conveys the author's admonition: '[he] prays you to believe his ware is still the same; else you will make him justly suspect that he that is so loath to look on a baby or an hobbyhorse here, would be glad to take up a commodity of them, at any laughter, or loss, in another place' (p. 34). The 'other place' referred to is, of course, Smithfield; the Induction offers its own version of the *tu quoque* by admonishing London critics of Jonson's play, and of the theatre more generally, to look to kindred vices under their own jurisdiction that they are more willing to tolerate.

What better advocate for an author's interests than the Prompter, whose actual job in the theatre was to make sure everyone got their lines according to the book? Jonson here points to the same equivalence between the theatre and the fair that we have already discussed in connection with the Prologue and Epilogue. He also suggests that the Puritan opposition to the theatre is financially based: the zealous brethren war against it because they have not found a way to profit from it. And indeed, within the play, Puritan reforming zeal often comes down to a matter of money, as in Dame Purecraft's 'zeal' for arranging sanctified marriages between indigent Brethren in the Faith and rich widows or between poor Sisters and 'wealthy bachelors', transactions from which she herself profits handsomely (5.2.50-45-68, p. 157). But the Induction's comical contract with the reader over a range of approved readings is not supplemented by any similar statement at the end of the play. How did the play signify on the public stage, without the Epilogue to bring its swirling 'licence' safely under the authority of the king? Jonson seems simultaneously to place his audience firmly under contract through his Induction and to seduce them into breaking it through what follows. One of the main messages of the Fair is that health and communal vitality depend on the breaking of contracts – the breaking of legalism itself. To a significant degree, my court-centred reading of the play posited an audience that never was: a public audience of 1614 with the same access to the Prologue and Epilogue that readers of Jonson's *Works* from 1640 to the present have had.

To subject such a delirious and disorderly piece of comedy to such a rigid system of interpretation now seems to me to carry a strong element of defensiveness about it, a defensiveness that was both mine and Jonson's. My own zeal to organise and tidy up Jonson's *Fair* was an attempt to cope with the disorienting and troubling experience of reading the play, not least, I now suspect, because of the play's shabby treatment of women – its easy equation between pig and punk, its cavalier portrayal of the fallen wives of John Littlewit and the Justice Adam Overdo, its use of the site of the feminine to dismantle culturally enforced distinctions between the clean and the dirty. Readings of the play have traditionally divided between vitalist admiration for its energy and moralist condemnations of its vice: my reading allowed me to have Jonson's *Fair* both ways and at the same time avoid the feminist interpretive issues that I found most troubling. Rather like the reformers within the play, I too wanted to purge and order the *Fair*, though I saw myself as operating under the higher 'licence' of the playwright's Prologue and Epilogue. And indeed, by the time my argument appeared in book form I was troubled by its overtidiness, particularly given that Jonson's own ideological affiliations and friendships were so much more diverse than a court-centred reading of the play would suggest. What I would like to do here is disarrange my previous line of interpretation by considering the Puritan in *Bartholomew Fair* in terms of issues other than James I's war against the sabbatarians.

In particular, to what extent might the play's framing devices have been defences on Jonson's own part against other modes of interpretation or against an inchoate spirit of revelry that defies interpretation? To suggest that Jonson (or any other artist, for that matter) worked partly through the erection of barriers against self-recognition is to say nothing new. What is striking in the case of Jonson is the almost exhibitionistic vehemence with which he erects his defensive barriers, and yet the ease with which they are dismantled by the reader. There is much of Jonson himself in the Puritan at *Bartholomew Fair*. Of all the major Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists, he was easily the most vocal in his contempt for the theatre as an institution and for its shoddy artistic standards. Busy's condemnation of the puppet play is based on the biblical injunction against cross-dressing rather than Jonsonian moral and aesthetic strictures, but it nevertheless echoes the contempt for theatrical sensationalism attributed to the author of *Bartholomew Fair* by the Bookkeeper: 'If there be never a servant-monster i' the *Fair*, who can help it? he says; nor a nest of antics? He is loth to make nature afraid in his plays, like those that beget *Tales*, *Tempests*, and such like drolleries, to mix his head with other men's heels, let the concupiscence of jigs and dances reign as strong as it will amongst you' (Induction, 113–18). Unlike the author of *The Tempest*, Jonson is able to remain aloof from the 'drolleries' of other men's heels. The 'concupiscence of jigs' is Busy talk – the language of contemporary Puritan and civic

opposition to the drama. London authorities had recently suppressed jigs at the end of plays on grounds that they incited sexual profligacy and rebellion. In *Bartholomew Fair's* Prologue to the king Jonson adopts a strongly anti-Puritan stance, but in the Induction at the Hope Theatre he associates himself – or allows his Bookkeeper to associate him – with the language of Jacobean anti-theatricality.

If, as Peter Stallybrass and Allon White have brilliantly suggested in a discussion of the play published almost simultaneously with mine, we look at *Bartholomew Fair* from the bottom up instead of from the top down, we see a Jonson irrevocably mired in the 'low' popular anarchic vitalism he purported to despise, a Jonson whose control over his materials was tenuous rather than masterful.<sup>3</sup> The enormities of the fair and of the play are, after all, the playwright's enormities: he authored them every bit as much as he did the supplementary material designed to place them under restraint. The pig woman Ursula may not be precisely a 'servant-monster' in the mode of Caliban, but she is certainly as strikingly unorthodox; her sweltering booth and succulent vapours at the centre of the play are far more memorable than Prologue, Epilogue and Induction. *Bartholomew Fair's* defensiveness against the Puritan derives ultimately from a suppressed recognition of kinship on the part of Jonson himself. It is characteristic of Jonson to write into his work a meticulous set of discriminations among things that appear similar on the surface but need to be understood as moral opposites. It is equally characteristic of him to fail to sustain the distinctions he has taken pains to establish – to collapse them uproariously into one another, or at least allow them to contaminate one another to the extent that the playwright's 'authority' over his materials is lost. Considered from the bottom up instead of from the top downward, Jonson's hedges against free interpretation are desperately futile attempts at containing his own ludic impulses along with the populist energies he purported to despise.

Over and over again throughout the poet's works, we find Jonson airing and distancing himself from his own opinions and identity through flamboyant and nearly transparent mechanisms of displacement. We know very little about Jonson's family background, except that he identified his real father, who died before his birth, as a 'minister'. That particular term was used more of nonconformists than of Church of England men – it would be rather deliciously appropriate for Jonson's portrayal of the Banbury Puritan if, as Patrick Collinson has speculated in the essay paired with this one, his father was of the same ideological stamp. An anxiety of paternal influence is easier to demonstrate in the case of Jonson's despised stepfather, the bricklayer, who got Jonson apprenticed and apparently expected him to follow in his

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, 1986), pp. 27–79.

own footsteps. According to Thomas Fuller's seventeenth-century report, the young Jonson lived 'in Harts-horn-lane near Charing-cross' with his mother and stepfather, probably Robert Brett, a bricklayer living on that street. It should be noted that Hartshorn Lane ran alongside an open sewer – perhaps a convenient source of raw material for Brett's trade, which required a plentiful supply of dung – but Brett had improved the open ditch along his property by building a 'little garden' over it in 1586.<sup>4</sup> An open sewer topped with a garden – it is an evocative image in terms of Jonson's penchant as author for revealing the bubbling vice beneath apparently serene surfaces, as in the case of the would-be correctors of Bartholomew Fair. Jonson's own stance toward concealed vices was often close to that of his Puritan reformer Zeal-of-the-Land Busy. And yet, he could never eradicate the bricklayer within: the trouble with the levelling message of the *tu quoque* is that, once set in operation, it spares no one, least of all the author himself. In Jonson, authorial control is never far distant from painful, or gleeful, self-exposure.

As an illustration of this proposition, we might briefly consider Jonson's little gem of mock-heroic scatology, his final epigram 'On the Famous Voyage', which displaces the scene of Jonson's childhood onto a vast subterranean landscape of London itself. Although I have not seen the suggestion made before, the 'Famous Voyage' was in all likelihood instigated by several noteworthy efforts on the part of the City of London to control and reverse the fouling of its water supply. Edmond Howe's continuation of John Stow's *Chronicle of England* (1615) rises to a tone of almost epic panegyric in praising engineering feats on the part of civic fathers during the previous decade for the purification of the sewers and water supply of the 'glorious City of London'. Open ditches were cleaned up and bricked over, a river was diverted through an elaborate system of conduits to bring a plentiful supply of fresh water. Howe also records various civic entertainments and ceremonies at which these heroic achievements were commemorated over the years.<sup>5</sup> Jonson's poem deflates that strain of civic self-congratulation by taking his readers on a tour of the continuing, and indeed ineradicable, filth underlying the apparent improvements. There is an intriguing parallel between the larger civic improvements mocked in this poem and the small improvement made by his stepfather, who covered a similar ditch with a garden. There is also an intriguing parallel between the mock-heroic uncovering of vice in the 'Famous Voyage' and the stance of the Puritan toward Bartholomew Fair. Zeal-of-the-Land Busy and Jonson's 'I' in the poem share the same love for humorous bombast, the same apparent need to feed off what they

<sup>4</sup> Cited from David Riggs, *Ben Jonson: A Life* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 9–10.

<sup>5</sup> Edmond Howe, *The Annales, or Generall Chronicle of England, begun first by maister John Stow, and after him continued . . . vnto the ende of this present yeere 1614* (1615), pp. 937–40.

condemn. In each case, the moralist's zeal against the monstrosity in question is all too clearly revealed as unacknowledged identification: Jonson's contemporaries were all too well aware of Jonson's humble childhood in the house of the bricklayer. What would they have made of his lovingly self-confessional catalogue of City farts and effluvia in his 'Famous Voyage'? We may wonder whether Jonson's hatred of City filth, his lifelong abhorrence/fascination with matters scatological, had something to do with the fact that he grew up alongside a sewer.

*The Alchemist* offers another instance of flamboyant displacement. The play's setting is Blackfriars, and Jonson himself seems to have been living in Blackfriars at the time that the play was first produced. Indeed, although we have no proof, it is tempting to postulate that the play was composed for the reopening of the Blackfriars Theatre by Richard Burbage and the King's Men in 1609–10. In 1608, James I had dissolved the Children of Blackfriars on the grounds of the boys' company's profanity and irreverence towards authority. The 'house' at Blackfriars remained vacant for a time while Burbage went through legal skirmishes to get it back from its lessee. Although I have not seen these remarked, the play offers a tempting set of equivalences between Blackfriars Theatre, a 'house' left vacant and then tenanted by rogues and mountebanks, and Lovewit's usurped 'house' in Blackfriars. The parallels would have been available to audiences in 1610, whether or not the play was performed at Blackfriars.

But how are we to read Jonson's tempting set of allegorical equivalences between Lovewit's house and Burbage's? Is the previously dissolved boys' company to be identified with the Alchemist, his boy, and his gulls, or are the King's Men just as likely to be so identified? It was they, rather than the Children of Blackfriars, who had recently occupied an empty house, in parallel with the situation of the play. We can therefore read *The Alchemist* topically either as a critique of debased theatre, like that practised by the Children of Blackfriars before the company was dissolved by the king, or as an extended critique of the theatre as practised by the King's Men – a critique of the theatre in itself, with its miraculous, shabby powers of transformation, its exploitation of a series of hapless gulls. In *The Alchemist* we are confronted with yet another instance of the poet's displacement of his own ambivalences, except that in this case the Puritans Ananias and Tribulation are more victims of the Alchemist and his subtle elixir than intrusive reformers in the manner of *Bartholomew Fair's* Zeal-of-the-Land Busy. In *The Alchemist*, Jonson seems to suggest that the theatre needs the Puritan in the same way that the Alchemist needs his dupes. And here, as in *Bartholomew Fair*, he makes a gesture toward containing the play's explosive energies by prefacing it with a cautionary prologue calling upon the auditory to recognise the play's goal of human betterment. The printed text also includes a dedicatory epistle to Lady Wroth and an

epistle to the reader-understander lamenting the 'concupiscence of dances and antics' that dominate 'this age in poetry'.<sup>6</sup> More Busy talk, from one who lived alongside the famous Puritans of Blackfriars.

A recent historicist study of the 'liberties' of London has depicted them (rather in the manner of the City fathers themselves) as sinkholes of licence and every form of vice.<sup>7</sup> But the liberties were also inhabited by large numbers of Puritans. Ecclesiastical nonconformists tended to live in 'liberties' like Blackfriars because there they were free of at least some episcopal surveillance. As Jonson himself loved to point out (there are mocking references in both *Bartholomew Fair* and *The Alchemist*), many of these 'zealous brethren' made their livings off the theatre and associated vanities as feathermakers, tiring women, and the like. Perhaps one reason Jonson kept returning to the feathermakers of Blackfriars was because they were implicated in the same ideological contradictions that Jonson was himself – making a living off an institution that a part of him heartily despised.

If we take a high moral line of interpretation like that suggested by Jonson's prefatory materials to *The Alchemist*, then we can easily enough quiet such unauthorised speculation by identifying Jonson firmly with the sensible, well-meaning character of Lovewit. The master's recovery of his house from the charlatans could then suggest a parallel Jonsonian rescue of the institution of the theatre from those elements (like the Children of Blackfriars) who had been debasing it. But the very play, *The Alchemist*, that announces this 'notable reform' is itself constituted by the outrageously funny antics of the charlatans – we encounter yet another nest of interpretive boxes in which the author becomes inextricable from the carnivalesque he professes to find wanting. Here, as in *Bartholomew Fair*, the high and low are impossible to keep distinct without a violent effort of separation on the part of the interpreter – an effort that threatens to rob the play of those very elements that make it theatrically volatile and alive.

In the late 1970s when I constructed my argument about the Puritan in *Bartholomew Fair*, I was interested in mapping out the play's topical resonances – the ways in which Jonson evokes the behaviour and rhetorical style of actual anti-theatrical spokesmen of the period. Certainly Busy's diatribes against the fair and the drama echo some of the arguments of contemporary tracts and sermons, although (as is appropriate to parody) Busy's wild, inchoate doomsday imagery goes even beyond the most colourful of those. And certainly in his Prologue to James, Jonson invites the king to see the 'zealous noise' of contemporary anti-sabbatarian sentiment in the character of the Puritan. At present, however, in parallel with Patrick Collinson's essay, I am more interested in Zeal-of-the-Land Busy as construction than as reflection. Jonson's construction of the Puritan

<sup>6</sup> Cited from Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*, ed. Alvin B. Kernan (1974; repr. New Haven, 1979), p. 20.

<sup>7</sup> Steven Mullaney, *The Place of the Stage: License, Play, and Power in Renaissance England* (Chicago, 1988).

may have served his own purposes of simultaneous self-denial and self-revelation, but it obviously satisfied broader, more public hungers as well. To what extent might the stage-Puritan have been an artifact of the theatre's need to distance itself from the moral ambiguity of its own institutional status and appeal? There was obviously a market for such figures – not only James I himself but a number of his subjects took pleasure in the ritualised public dismantling of the religious hypocrite. For them, Busy may have been a reassuring character because he siphoned off to a hypothesised lunatic fringe questions about moral and social contradiction that would otherwise have had to be confronted more directly – as they were in the violent sabbatarianism of the 1640s that brought about, among other things, the closing of the theatres.

Much to his exasperation, Jonson was successful on stage only in so far as he managed to displace his high-flown authorial judiciousness onto characters like Busy and Overdo. But by doing so, inevitably, he lost authorial control. If he had not been able to create anti-theatrical Puritans like Busy, and thereby prismatically to scatter and dispel his own misgivings about the theatre, he might have turned Puritan himself. Or, at the very least, he might have felt considerably less free as a dramatist to display and revel in the pungent mire of the carnivalesque.