THE AUDIENCES OF FRANCIS BEAUMONT’S THE KNIGHT OF THE BURNING PESTLE

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Abstract

This essay sets out to examine critically Beaumont’s representation of different audiences in his play The Knight of the Burning Pestle. The dominant critical tradition has it that the play is even-handed in its criticism of audiences, but the argument here is that different audience tastes are pitted against each other. The dominant motif is that treated seriously in, for example, Spenser’s The Faerie Queene and it is this tradition and its various deployments by different social groups that is placed under scrutiny in the play. As a result it is an established dramatic form that is placed under scrutiny as different audiences seek to appropriate it for their own purposes.

Keywords: Chivalric comedy, grocers’ emblem, merchants, comedy, laughter

Francis Beaumont’s The Knight of the Burning Pestle was among the first of an impressive list of editions that Michael (‘Mick’) Hattaway produced during a long career as a scholar of early modern drama. The edition appeared in 1969, some nine years after Mick had acted in a student production of the play, taking the role of Rafe, and it has subsequently appeared in a second edition (2002) with updated references. The period 1969-2002 was one of great upheaval in the field
of English Studies and Hattaway's edition of Shakespeare's *As You Like It* (2009), with its significant adjustments in critical discourse registers many of the changes that took place during that time. His first edition of *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, reliant on a firmly established traditional critical discourse, regarded the play as 'written for an elitist audience about 1608' as he wrote in *Elizabethan Popular Theatre* (Hattaway 1). But later in the same book, he went on to suggest that Beaumont deployed the demotic ethos of the public playhouse to embed in the structure of the play the notion of a popular audience taking over the drama. (46) Moreover, *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* is cited to support the claim that popular plays, such as *Mucedorus*, that James I saw performed at court in 1610, simply revived a tradition of chivalric romance that 'had been a staple of Shrove-tide entertainment at Court over thirty years before.' (130) Hattaway suggests that there was some difficulty in trying to separate popular from courtly drama, although he came to the view – following Andrew Gurr's *The Shakespearean Playing Companies* (1996) - that Beaumont's play, written for the Blackfriars, was part of an ethos that emphasised 'parody or pastiche as well as intimate satire, and mannered if not truly sophisticated plays dealing with passionate intrigues of the sort that would appeal to the gentlemen of King James's Court.' (Hattaway, 'Introduction' ix) And yet, as the publisher Walter Burre, writing to Robert Keysar in his prefatory Epistle indicated, the play was unsuccessful when it first appeared because its first audiences either lacked 'judgement' or did not understand 'the privy mark of irony about it.' (3) This seems to have been the reverse case of John Webster whose *The White Devil* played to rowdy audiences probably at the Red Bull in Clerkenwell (Brown xx-xxiii)¹ but who were also accused of a lack of sophistication. Even so, the case of Shakespeare whose plays were performed both at Court and in the Globe suggests that claims made against the idiosyncrasies of audiences could be exaggerated, and that the epithet 'popular' was not as stable a category as theatre historians have assumed.

More recently Bill Angus (2018) has attempted to tease out a sub-text in the play that deals with the dramatisation of the practice of political informers. His claim is that the play contains a sinister competition between different sections of the audience eager to pursue their own interests. He argues that 'Beaumont's play...stages a kind of dramatic authorship which seems to feel itself under siege

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by an unruly form of audience empowerment associated with informing.’ (Angus 2) It is possible to accede to the first part of this claim, although the evidence for the second part is a little less than convincing. My concern, however, is not to dispute Angus’s claim but, rather, to provide a framework that is less concerned with a hermeneutics of suspicion that with a competition for cultural capital in which the objective is possession of a particular chivalric meme: that involving the errant knight stimulated to deeds of valour in honour of an aristocratic lady. In this connection it is worth remembering that the play’s title offers a flagrantly phallic representation that we can trace back to the opening canto of Edmund Spenser’s The Faerie Queene. Spenser’s narrator’s objective is to exchange ‘lowly Shepheardes weeds’ in order to revitalise an outmoded artistic form and ‘sing of Knights and Ladies gentle deeds.’ (Spenser 27)² Canto 1 introduces us to ‘A gentle Knight:

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pricking on the plaine,
Y clad in mightie armes and silver shielde
Wherein old dints of deepe wounds did remaine,
The cruell markes of many a bloudie field. (Canto 1:3-5)
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If Spenser’s aim is ‘to fashion a gentleman’ then the Grocers’ knight represents the appropriation of this chivalric ideal for a comically quixotic popular alternative, and the emblem chosen for his shield associates knightly demeanour with a tumescence that its prototype only implied, preferring to submit it to a thoroughly moral, though by no means uncomplicated, context in the behaviour of Spenser’s Red Cross knight.³ The Citizen’s desire to have ‘a grocer and he shall do admirable things’ (Induction: ll.34-5) aims to produce a narrative bound together by a series of linked episodes, but Beaumont’s play sets about fragmenting that narrative in such a way that foregrounds cultural and class differences by straying ironically into areas of double meaning that the idealised prototype resists. Thus each episode is isolated from the moralistic framework that underpins the Spenserian chivalric quest; indeed, the threats that Rafe encounters are largely amoral and are designed simply to glorify his status, to

² All quotations in this text are from the Longman edition of The Faerie Queene (1977).
³ See especially Book II Canto 1.57 that sketches out the ‘mean’ for Temperance whereby the extremes of melting in ‘pleasures whot desire’ and suffering ‘hartless griefe and doleful teene’ are countered by Temperance’s ‘golden squire’ (stanza 58). See also Stephen Greenblatt (157ff).
the point where finally, his death is little more than a comic event that has no deeper meaning.

This makes the concept of a singular, organic ‘audience’ as it emerges in The Knight of the Burning Pestle quite problematical, and we can best address this issue initially by reference to ‘audiences’ in the plural. Hattaway goes back to Alfred Harbage’s Shakespeare and the Rival Traditions (1952) to gloss Burre’s phrase ‘privy mark of irony’ and to refer to ‘its satire of the merchant class and of the citizens’ taste for old fashioned chivalric romance.’ (Hattaway, ‘Introduction’, ix-x) Burre seems to be alluding to the popular ignorance of an organic chivalric meme upon which irony rests. Indeed, he seems to be identifying two audiences, although Harbage’s claim – reduced to one organically unified audience - was that the play’s failure was ‘not because it satirised citizens [but] because it did so without animosity.’ (Hattaway, ‘Introduction’ x) In other words the play was allegedly even-handed in its satire, and its targets insofar as they were consistent, ranged across the social classes and across artistic genres. Much of this ambivalence has to do with the question of dramatic structure, and in particular with the blurring of the lines between audiences and play. This will, in turn raise questions about the identity of that section of the audience that invades the stage.

Stephen Greenblatt has defined the connection between identity and power as it appears in Spenser in strictly aristocratic terms. For example, he takes the figure of Sir Walter Raleigh, who, despite being involved in ‘hostility and frustration’ wears ‘the face of fervid worship.’ For Raleigh, the Queen was ‘Cynthia and he was the Ocean, she was Diana and he an adoring follower, she was the heroine of a chivalric romance and he her devoted knight’ (Greenblatt 165). But Greenblatt goes further, through a quotation from Sir John Harrington, the Queen’s godson, to expose the link between ‘power’ and ‘erotic relations’ concluding that

[t]he realism and irony remain, but they are caught up in an appreciation of the mutual interest of both ruler and subject in the transformation of power relations into erotic relations, an appreciation of the queen’s ability at once to fashion her identity and to manipulate the identities of her followers. (Greenblatt 169)

What Greenblatt is describing, via, Harrington and Sir Walter Raleigh, is a specific element of a complex political phenomenon articulated in terms of
classical, poetic and mythological relations. The question we need to consider is how much of this complex mythology the lower social classes in early Jacobean London imbibed through imitation. The point is that neither Rafe as the Grocers’ ‘Knight of the burning pestle’ nor Master Humphrey, Luce’s hapless suitor, go beyond appropriating fragments of a bygone aristocratic culture, although both are implicated in a process of theatricalisation that the play exploits.

Given that the actual audience that came to see The London Merchant was largely adult, and given that the Grocer and his wife emerge from that audience, we are entitled to enquire about their identities and whether or not they were adult. If these were adults, then their presence in a ‘children’s play’ would suggest a sophisticated examination of the relationship between ‘play’ and ‘audience’. The play’s structure perhaps, takes us a little further into what looks on the surface like an early modern version of a Pirandellian model where the drama of a particular audience (in Pirandello’s case the limited history of the relations between particular members of a family) is projected onto the stage. But we should take care with this apparent analogy, since Pirandello is concerned to challenge the mimetic foundation of theatrical representation in such a way that dramatic character remains fixed and defined in a very particular history. Beaumont’s eradication of the distance between actors and audience – exacerbated by the fact that the actors in the ‘inner’ play are children – seems designed to liberate (perhaps even to democratise) a particular dramatic form as the popular taste invades a theatre that habitually caters for a more select audience and articulates its habitual tropes. Perhaps we may say that either Beaumont has lost control of his material, and has inadvertently ceded authorship to a class determined to see its own interests represented in fictional form, or that the play steers a complex pathway through the conflicting demands of its ‘audiences’ thereby emphasising a tension between the idealising episodic structure of a traditional chivalric narrative, and a popular energy that fragments that narrative in the process of appropriating it. And all this takes place at a time when the ‘authorship’ of plays is a contested issue, and where the emphasis seemingly refuses to come down on one side or the other of the argument. Perhaps we might also say that Harbage’s ‘without animosity’ seriously underestimates (and, indeed, understates) one of the cardinal aims of comedy, that exposes to laughter the tensions in the complex structure of this play.
The structure of the play consists of three elements two of which are connected, and a third which the Citizen and his wife impose upon the actors. *The London Merchant* (which is the children’s company’s play) is focused on Venturewell’s attempt to marry his daughter Luce off to the aspiring but romantically illiterate Humphrey. Luce, for her part, favours Humphrey’s rival, and Venturewell’s apprentice, Jasper. Jasper is one of two sons of Merrythought and Mistress Merrythought and the brother of Michael. Rafe’s chivalric escapades cut across the plot and the sub-plot and provides opportunities for peripatetic collisions that offer more realistic versions of the chivalric activities of Rafe encouraged by the Citizens. Within the Merrythought household there is tension between husband and wife, the one carefree and the other concerned to provide for her younger son, Michael, while in the Venturewell household the relationship between father and daughter is unstable. These contrast with the much looser Citizens’ episodic plot that ranges over a number of folk motifs, and that appropriates the chivalric romance in order to elevate the status of the guild of Grocers. In this way an established, but possibly outmoded aristocratic form of cultural capital is appropriated by a rising social class, resulting in a democratisation and a distortion through the process of imitation. To this extent the play embodies a struggle for cultural capital, and one that aims to adapt the artistic property of one class for another. This is the point at which the concept of audience begins to fragment, and the distinction between different social groupings begins to blur.

*The Knight of the Burning Pestle* is one of a small group of plays in which the distance between actors and audience is persistently transgressed. Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (c.1596), a play that was both popular and that was played at Elizabeth’s court, offers a version of this transgression as the rude mechanicals (especially Bottom) trespass across the gap that divides the incompetent actors from a sneering onstage aristocratic audience. One element of Beaumont’s play harmonises with what James Kavanagh identifies as a major feature of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Kavanagh argues that Shakespeare’s play is ‘framed as comic romance’ but it also has ‘a profoundly threatening and threatened aspect: it is a play formed around questions of desire and obedience, representation and class power, and it is haunted throughout by the threat of death.’ (Kavanagh 152) The comic romance embedded in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* has two strands: the one involves the London Merchant, his daughter Luce.
and his apprentice Jasper but this action is positioned away from ‘all that’s near the court, from all that’s great / Within the compass of the city walls’ (Induction: ll. 111-12). Moreover, the Prologue informs us that the play has been cleansed of ‘all private taxes, immodest phrases, / Whate’er may but show like vicious,’ (ll.114-15) although he takes care to absolve it from what, at this stage, are the unpredictable activities of Rafe for whom the Citizens must accept responsibility. And behind this is the figure of Old Master Merrythought, Jasper’s father, who laughs at death. So from the outset two plays with significant differences in style are in motion, the one involving the London Merchant and the other involving Rafe: the one a domestic comedy, and the other an appropriated heroic romance designed to elevate the class of ‘grocers’. These plots and their offshoots will clash at various points and overlap, drawing into their aegis other elements, suitably transformed, as they are absorbed either into the comic romance or into the Grocers’ appropriation of its elements. Thus the tensions between the social classes as represented both onstage and in the audience are what generates the ‘plot’ of the play, and in particular its various meanderings.

One other element that gives an added dimension to the various actions involves the staging of the play by a company of boy actors, the Children of the Revels. The play appeared at about the same time or shortly after another play in which there is an element of confusion between audience and play, and which was performed by another children’s company, Paul’s Boys, Thomas Middleton’s A Mad World My Masters, that one editor describes as ‘an amiable play’ (Saccio 414). However, in Middleton’s play the confusion emerges briefly in only one episode in the final act involving a constable ‘i’th’ commonwealth’ rather than ‘i’th’ comedy.’ (5.2.159-160) What is important is that by 1606-7 representation had become sophisticated enough to allow reflection on its different levels of presentation. We might, of course, trace the enveloping of dramatic action within an overarching and determining aesthetic force back to Kyd’s The Spanish Tragedy (1587) but what Beaumont provides is an extension of this device into an area where a culturally self-conscious section of an audience might actually dictate the path of the action, and even offer an alternative to what the boys’ company are prepared to provide. The figure of the errant knight lends itself to the loose episodic structure in which a peripatetic hero encounters adventures while at the same time possessing the power to transform quotidian reality.
While from an aristocratic point of view such adventures applied to a lower social class appear risible and quixotic, but from the Grocers’ point of view they represent experiences that are accessible, and therefore empowering, as Bill Angus suggests. Indeed, the culture to which the Grocers have access offer a means of refurbishing elements of a hierarchy that has already begun to look outmoded. In Beaumont’s play, however, the quotidian and the popular require to be elevated: publicans become ‘hosts’ and barbers become threatening monsters. In short, the everyday obstacles are deliberately distorted and in such a way that the popular everyday can be elevated but at the same time risible. In the process the ideological tensions that appropriation produces are exposed and, as in popular experience, the elements of the chivalric narrative are all but eviscerated. Indeed, if there is a tension within the concept of authorship in the play then it is between the different class inflections of its efficacy. This raises some important questions about the relationship between the popular and the private theatres, and the ways in which familiar narrative memes are transformed as they pass from one context to another. Indeed, as the history of early modern theatre suggests, the overlap between audiences may have been closer, and the tensions more serious, than has hitherto been suggested.

In The Knight of the Burning Pestle the tensions are there from the Induction onwards. The Citizen enters from the audience to defend his class from the allegation that the theatre has a long tradition (‘[t]his seven years’) of sneering at citizens. His solution is to appropriate an existing heroic discourse in order to foreground the achievements of the commons of the city,’ (II.26) but the Prologue persists in a satiric vein suggesting a derisory title for the Citizen’s play: ‘The Life and Death of Fat Drake or the Repairing of Fleet privies’ (II.28-9) The Citizen, however, wants a representative role model: ‘I will have a grocer, and he shall do admirable things.’ (I.35), but before he can say what they are his wife comes up out of the audience with a suggestion: ‘Let him kill a lion with a pestle, husband; let him kill a lion with a pestle.’ (II.43-4) The ‘pestle’ may well be an emblematic tool of the grocer’s trade, but it is also sexually suggestive and establishes a specifically sensuous and parodic link with a figure such as Spenser’s Red Cross Knight of The Fairie Queene, who began his quest ‘pricking on the plaine’ (I.1) Indeed, we may say that the innuendo that this points up is a characteristic popular device in a lexicon of strategies in the process of undermining a socially superior form. In the ten years since Spenser’s poem had appeared, its chivalric ethos was ripe
for appropriation thereby bringing into tension what Helen Cooper has identified in a much wider context as ‘the gender-inclusive intensity of private emotion and the male public world of military ambition and engagement.’ (Cooper 25) What Beaumont’s play adds to that is a coarsening of the romance motif by re-positioning it in the popular domain, where imitation by children of adult themes permits multiple transformations: ostlers are elevated into knights, and barbers become ogres and giants, all functioning as adversaries for an apprentice grocer elevated to the status of a knighthood that is not uniformly successful in its quests. And the emblem of that elevation is the phallic ‘burning’ pestle that represents the warrior’s masculine desire for the ‘lady’ to whom he dedicates his exploits. Rafe’s elevation – one might also say, his erection – demystifies the idealisation of motive that was traditionally associated with the noble quest, and parodies it, thereby returning to view what idealisation had obscured. Thus the Grocer and his Wife effectively sexualise what had traditionally been shaped by a loosely Christian quest, in order to signal the rising, but biologically precarious, vitality and virility of the Grocer’s trade. At the end of the Induction the Prologue draws a clear distinction between what his play has to offer compared with that of the Citizens:

Fly far from hence
All private taxes, immodest phrases,
Whate’er may but show like vicious:
For wicked mirth never true pleasure brings,
But honest minds are pleased with honest things-
Thus much for what we do; but for Rafe’s part you
must answer for yourselves. (ll.113-19)

The Prologue can accept responsibility for his play, but refuses to own ‘Rafe’s part’ which is both his ‘lines’ but also his emblem, ‘the burning pestle.’

What do we make of the Prologue’s claim for his play? Is it an accurate description of the drama that will involve the merchant Venturewell, his unruly apprentice Jasper and his chosen future son-in-law Master Humphrey? The subject-matter of this play is familiar and orthodox: the tension between a father and a daughter stemming from a difference of opinion about a suitable marriage partner, which was the staple of domestic comedy. Moreover, Master Humphrey’s command of romantic language is hilariously incompetent; for
example, while in Waltham Forest his stuttering and involuntary innuendo makes of him a ridiculous courtier wholly unable to command the language of courtship. Riding, walking, and urinating are here not easy to differentiate, so that being entangled ‘ever to your will’ the hapless Humphrey may be subject to all three.

Good Mistress Luce, however I in fault am
For your lame horse, you’re welcome unto Waltham.
But which way now to go or what to say
I know not truly till it be broad day;

LUCE
Oh fear not, Master Humphrey, I am guide
For this place good enough.

HUMPHREY
Then up and ride,
Or if it please you walk for your repose,
Or sit, or if you will, go pluck a rose;
Either of which shall be indifferent
To your good friend and Humphrey, whose consent
Is so entangled ever to your will,
As the poor harmless horse is to the mill. (II.ii.207-18)

For his part, Rafe’s thespian pedigree is clear, as he recalls verbatim Hotspur’s speech about ‘honour’ from 1 Henry IV (1.3.20ff) and in a style that is in keeping with his emblem of tumescence. But this is one of a number of quotations from an heroic discourse, imported from the popular theatre and appropriated by the grocer-knight. Once Rafe has established his theatrical bona fides the action turns to the Prologue’s plot which is constantly interrupted by the Citizen and his Wife. Luce and Jasper embark on their plot to elope while the Citizen and his Wife prepare Rafe for his role and assure their audience that he will uncover any ‘knavery’ in this play. By the way, it is worth noting that this is closer to Spenser than to the shadier business of informing, notwithstanding an occasional reference to the practice. This short intervention acts as a prelude to the appearance of Jasper’s rival, Humphrey and Venturewell. From the very outset Venturewell’s judgement is impugned and Humphrey is presented as a stock, but inept ‘respectable’ suitor who ‘of gentle blood and gentle seem’ (I.1.83). What Jasper and Rafe share, in contrast is an inventiveness and an imagination whereas Humphrey is a wooden alternative. What emerges is a ‘middling sort’ that is anything but unified, imitating at a number of levels the theatrical
discourses of a society in which hierarchy seems to be in the process of breaking down. If this is an elitist play, then its even-handed criticism of its various elements includes a critique of elitism from the standpoint of the very populism that it incorporates into its structures.

The play’s targets for criticism are to some extent quite clear. Venturewell’s preferred suitor for Luce, Humphrey, is subjected to merciless ridicule. His wooden persona is incarcerated within a form of verse that is clumsy and unpredictable. Indeed, his first encounter with Luce is an embarrassing combination of everyday discourse and romantic clichés:

Fair Mistress Luce, how do you do? Are you well? 
Give me your hand, and then I pray you tell 
How doth your little sister and your brother, 
And whether you love me or any other. (Act 1 ll. 115-18)

Later, in the depths of Waltham Forest, which is the domain of the errant Rafe, but also of Mistress Merrythought and her son Michael, Humphrey is, as we have seen, at it again only this time his romantic discourse collapses into something ludicrously physical. For Luce Waltham Forest presents no challenge except to Humphrey’s line of seduction.

Hattaway’s glossing of l.214, while perfectly proper in 1969: ‘go pluck a rose make water (Tilley R184)’ understates the coarse bathos to which Humphrey’s utterly unselconscious discourse occasionally sinks, while it also lays bare the foundations of a courtship whose venereal roots show through its chivalric surface.

The explicit commentary comes from the Citizen and his Wife and their attitudes shift depending upon their responses to whatever confronts them. They break into the chivalric mode, they stand outside it, they offer alternatives, and they insist that Rafe’s behaviour incorporates into his persona all of the rituals that identify the Grocers’ trade. Indeed, in the Interlude to Act 4 Rafe seeks to represent ‘the merry month of May’ (Interlude 4: l.27), but this expands into a patriotic anthem in support of the English king (James 1). Thus, what begins as an attempt to elevate the Grocers’ trade, ends by incorporating into it a range of nationalistic rituals, and in a militaristic appeal to the patron saint of England:
Remember, then, whose cause you have in hand, and like a sort of true-born scavengers, scour me this famous realm of enemies. I have no more to say but this: stand to your tacklings, lads, and show the world you can as well brandish a sword as shake an apron. Saint George, and on, my hearts!

OMNES

Saint George! Saint George! (Act 5:153-59)

Here the realism of the troops to which Rafe appeals is subsumed into a larger pattern of nationalistic sentiments that serves to compensate for the individual failings of Rafe's company, who can all 'shake an apron' as well as 'brandish a sword.' Here the 'popular' seeps into the nationalistic as elements of venereality, nationalistic violence and idealisation inform each other. This is not the knight acting exclusively as the vassal of an aristocratic femininity, but the apprentice grocer as representative of the nation, absorbing national rituals the focus of which is only occasionally on the bathetic figure of 'Susan' of Puddle wharf. Indeed, we occasionally lose sight of her in the wider picture of Rafe as representative grocer. All of the plots touch in different ways on the tensions that beset quotidian domestic relations: the preoccupation of parents, Merrythought's persistent laughter in the face of death as an antidote to the anxieties of everyday life, the ingenuity required to overcome obstacles to social harmony, and the art that represents versions of these tensions.

All of this still leaves the problem of the ending of the play. In The London Merchant the ending is resolved with Merrythought and the Merchant agreeing to the match of Luce and the ingeniously inventive Jasper, but as the Citizen observes, 'Everybody's part is come to an end but Rafe's, and he's left out.' (Act 5: 273-4) Rafe must now die an appropriately heroic death, but the Boy, who is responsible for the aesthetic structure of the play, thinks that death would be inappropriate for a comedy. Rafe enters with 'a forked arrow through his head' (Act 5: l. 283.1) and he proceeds to recount in a parody of a number of ghost scenes and his chivalric adventures before expiring in a comic death that meets the wishes of all of the onstage audiences. The final word is left to the Grocer's Wife, who maintains her habit of violating the fictive carapace of the play to seek confirmation of its affective power. Hers is a deconstructive strategy that exposes the variable appeal of the play to its different audiences. Indeed, this is not an organic audience that we might expect from the public theatre but a series
of competing audiences all of whom can lay some claim to ownership of the cultural capital that the play embodies, and the equally variable aesthetics to which each section of the audience attaches its demands. If the Grocer and his Wife are responsible for one set of fictions, then that part of the audience that comes to watch *The London Merchant* is responsible for another, and each effectively wrestles the play into its own structure of meaning and feeling. What *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* shows is the fracturing of an audience, each sectional interest pursuing its own preferred fictions, and in the process, extracting from what was once an organic tradition particular details to suit its own perception of itself. While these details are exposed to parody, no single element is preferred above the others, and this suggests that there is no central focus in the play. Each position acknowledges its own fictionality, and each hangs on to its own preferred model of veracity, and its preferred fantasies. All of the elements of early modern comic drama are present in the play, but not necessarily in any permanently recognisable order with the result that each section of the audience is invited to champion the elements of performance that it recognises and approves.

To think of Beaumont’s play as an example of a struggle between rival traditions is to misrepresent what is, in effect, a gallimaufry of recognisable theatrical forms and effects that may, at one point in its history, have begun by being organically connected. Beaumont’s theatre fractures the dream of organic unity and replaces it with a series of theatrical forms for which the different sections of an audience compete. This process of fragmentation – which presents a challenge to any conception of aesthetic totality - would be further exacerbated if the Grocer and his Wife were *actually* members of the adult audience seeking to reclaim its fictions from a company of children. The process of imitation is here pluralised to the extent that there can be no preferred model of reality; each element claims what it recognises as its own, each transforms reality in its own way, and each reserves the right to stretch its narrative in whatever direction it chooses. The image of ‘the burning pestle’ therefore becomes an implicitly obscene touchstone that turns an idealised artistic gold into venal and venereal base metal.

But within this plurality there remain a number of recognisable hierarchical and theatrical features. For example, in the resurrected ghost of Jasper, the initiative in the Venturewell-Jasper-Luce plot rests finally with
masculine power and redeems the conflict for a patriarchal conclusion. It is Old Merrythought who has the last word in that section of the plot in which he is involved, although the Citizen and his Wife appear to share responsibility for their section of the play. It is, perhaps, too easy to suggest, as Diana Henderson has in ‘The Theatre and Domestic Culture’ that ‘the Citizen’s wife is cheerfully mocked for pushing their apprentice Ralph into the play as hero, and also for her failure to discern the logic of the players’ script.’ (180) Her activities are closer to acts of appropriation that offer us a glimpse of what is at stake in the attempt to confer ‘citizen’ status upon established theatrical forms. Indeed, the Citizen and his wife are members of what Michael Bristol has called ‘the middling sort’ (231), a variable category that was in no way an organic whole. What we see in The Knight of the Burning Pestle is the mobilisations of particular cultural forms (giants, carnivalesque occasions, social rituals) all subsumed into the task of affirming the status of the Citizen and his wife. Neither is free from criticism, but nor is their position demolished. Indeed, it is the aristocratic cultural forms that the play demystifies, as the sensual impetus that underlies the idealism of the chivalric code is exposed. The play ends in festivity, and Rafe’s comic death is a role that he simply steps out of. Indeed the entire action functions as a kind of sponge, sucking a range of competing artistic forms into its aegis and re-affirming the capacity of a Children’s company to represent them without prejudice. The final image is of Nell, - an echo of Jonson’s Justice Overdo from Bartholomew Fair, mingling with the players and inviting them back to a feast. It is here that the violent spirit of the carnivalesque that has emerged at various points in the play, gives way to a feminized bonhomie that situates courtesy within the Citizen class, and returns the Grocer to the domestic sphere of his Wife.

Works Cited


**BIO NOTE**

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