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Thomas Middleton's Early City Comedies

by

Dennis Hengeveld

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

Doctor of Philosophy

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A NOTE ON TEXTS

While the Bullen edition (A. H. Bullen, The Works of Thomas Middleton. 8 vols. London, 1885-86) is still the standard one, several of Middleton's best plays have been recently re-edited under the auspices of various university presses (The Revels Plays: Harvard University Press; Regents Renaissance Drama Series: University of Nebraska Press; The Fountainwell Drama Texts: University of California Press). Since the new texts, and the critical apparatus accompanying them, are superior and more accessible, I have used them in preference to Bullen's important, but dated, versions of the plays. My choice complicates my text on a few occasions. The Revels and the Regents Renaissance series use modern spellings; the Fountainwell texts are devoted to a normalized reproduction of the seventeenth-century originals. To honor the principle of scholarly accuracy and the hard work of different editors, I have reproduced all quotations as they appear in the published editions. To honor my own sense of decorum and to avoid confusion on the part of the reader, I have modernized the spelling of all characters' names and the unmarked snippets of dialogue and stage directions which appear in my own text. I have followed the same principle when making use of other playwrights and their plays.
INTRODUCTION:
IN SEARCH OF THE AUDIENCE

Jacobean City Comedies have received a good deal of critical attention since the publication of Kathleen M. Lynch's seminal study, *The Social Mode of Restoration Comedy* (1926), and L. C. Knights' more definitive analysis, *Drama & Society in the Age of Jonson* (1937). What, then, is the point to another treatment of this subject, even if it is directed at only one author whose plays have not yet been exhaustively explored? With all due respect to those who have written before me, and with a real sense of gratitude to them for all they have taught me, it seems to me that they have proved to be better social and ideological historians than drama critics. There is much to be said for social historians and historians of ideas; they can give us wonderful insights into a given age and often a fresh understanding of our own in an historical perspective. But there is also the danger that their findings (and they are, after all, findings, not the whole truth suddenly revealed) may be applied too ruthlessly to admit distinctions between individual works of a kind. Or, if such a researcher finds a way of life or an ideology compatible or incompatible with his own in an artist's work, there is the danger that he will approve or disapprove of a play for what it teaches rather than what it is. In my opinion both sins, venial rather than mortal, have been committed by my predecessors.
Their method, though brilliantly conceived to illuminate the not always obvious connections between social and economic history and the plays they are examining, occasionally provides a rather fulsome light to make aesthetic judgments by. L. C. Knights' book, probably still the best on Jacobean City Comedies, provides a good example. His title is accurate enough. But probably it should be reversed: instead of Drama & Society in the Age of Jonson, we should have had Society & Drama in the Age of Jonson. If he had cared to be even more accurate in the naming, but less rhetorically balanced, he might have titled it Economic Malformations in the Elizabethan Body Politic and Their Influences on Certain Comic Dramatists: Some of Whom Responded Correctly, Some Less Correctly, and Some Not Well at All. In no sense do I mean to be malicious. It is merely a question as to whether or not this is the best way to get at a stage play.

The description of Knights' book on the jacket cover of the fourth impression is an accurate one:

For he has done more than to produce a fresh survey of the work of these writers: a literary revaluation, even though it helped to shake conventional academic estimates, is not his main object. Instead, he has mapped the social and economic bases of Elizabethan-Jacobean culture and then proceeded to a study of the drama of the period in relation to it. He has, in fact, taken the Marxist theory of the close bearing of economics on literature and has endeavoured to test it. Thus the first portion of his book is concerned with the major economic changes of the sixteenth century—mainly the growth
of capitalistic methods—of social changes and social thought, showing the way in which the moralists regarded the beginnings of modern capitalism. The second portion is critical, and here the author surveys the work of Jonson, Dekker, Heywood, Middleton and Massinger. 1

Obviously, the book lives up to this advertisement. But, it seems to me, Knights' findings, and the conclusions he draws from them, are based on three assumptions which should not be accepted uncritically.

First, and most important, is his assumption that art is the handmaiden of morality, and, ultimately, of a given morality. On pages 205-206 he quotes T. S. Eliot, congratulates him, and then dismisses him on this particular subject. He then proceeds to his own definition of the moral nature of art and supports it with a quotation from D. H. Lawrence's Studies in Classic American Literature:

Mr. Eliot says that 'the worlds created by artists like Jonson . . . are not fancy, because they have a logic of their own; and this logic illuminates the actual world, because it gives us a new point of view from which to inspect it.' Mr. Eliot's essay is the finest criticism of Jonson that we have, but the connexion between Jonson's plays and 'the actual world' is very much closer than that sentence allows. The attitude expressed in the passage last quoted informs the whole of Volpone, and it is, strictly, a moral attitude. Great literature cannot be discussed in purely moral terms, for the reason that these, at best, are too broad and general. But literary analysis is the keenest instrument we possess for the exploration of human values, and Volpone—a masterpiece of literary art—serves to make the point on which other great artists, besides Jonson, have been emphatic: 'The essential function of art is moral. Not aesthetic, not decorative, not pastime and recreation, but moral.'
This is a pleasant notion, and one which would, if it could be applied, very much simplify the difficult task of assessing the talents of different writers. Moreover, I know of none but the very flippant who would argue that great art has no moral function. Finally, Knights, who is a very sensitive and honest critic, has carefully and wisely protected himself with his qualifying sentence: "Great literature cannot be discussed in purely moral terms, for the reason that these, at best, are too broad and general." But even so strategically placed a qualifier in defense of an assumption which is at least partially valid cannot free us from the most important question all morality-inclined critics must face. Who is to judge? Who is to decide on the respective merits of moral positions made manifest by different artists in their separate works?

The answer is implied in the passage I have just quoted and made explicit throughout the rest of the book. It is the critic. This assumption seems to me the second which deserves careful scrutiny. First of all, it should be determined just what the critic so inclined must do. If we accept, along with Knights, Lawrence's notion that art is first of all moral, it would seem that all those who can be considered artists are working in the moral realm. It is up to the critic, then, to determine one artist's moral superiority to that of his fellows.
Secondly, before examining the justifications a given critic may use to defend his moral judgments, we should notice a few of the difficulties such an approach automatically presents. Again Professor Knights' book, because it is the very best of its kind, provides the most interesting examples.

What is to be done, for instance, with a morally ambiguous figure like John Marston, certainly an important dramatist writing the kinds of plays Knights is interested in, and either close to or at war with Jonson? He chooses to ignore Marston and deal instead with such pleasant but relatively mediocre playwrights as Heywood and Dekker. They provide, unlike Marston, an immediate contrast in moral sensitivity to Jonson, and are therefore helpful to the book's thesis. This is not meant as a criticism of Knights' text; it is meant as a criticism of his method. It seems that the creation of moral categories demands examples which can be easily fitted into them.

A second difficulty is the dramatist who, according to the critic, changes his spots. In Knights' book the obvious example is Thomas Middleton, usually regarded as the second best writer of city plays, ahead of Marston and behind Jonson.\(^3\) Quite properly, Professor Knights excoriates earlier critics who declared Middleton the great journalist-poet of his age.
In the first place, it is usually held that Middleton is a great realist.

'Realist', of course, means many things, but what these critics are asserting is that Middleton accurately reflects the life of a certain section of Jacobean London, of gallants and shopkeepers, of lawyers, brokers, cheats and prostitutes. But, reading his comedies as carefully as we can, we find—exciting discovery!—that gallants are likely to be in debt, that they make love to citizens' wives, that lawyers are concerned more for their profits than for justice, and that cutpurses are thieves. Middleton tells us nothing at all about these as individuals in a particular place and period. And the obvious reason, it seems to me, is that he was not interested in doing so.  

Not at issue here is Knights' suddenly revealed standard for judging the moral profundity of his subject: "Middleton tells us nothing at all about these as individuals in a particular place and period." What is important is his last sentence. It should be examined in connection with another of Knights' clauses on Middleton: "... one can only regret that the profound understanding of an essential human morality that one finds in The Changeling is nowhere displayed in the comedies." Are we dealing with the same dramatist here, the author of The Changeling and the author of the comedies, a writer Knights considered superior to Dekker and Heywood even though they "fitfully" presented a superior moral code to his? Since we obviously are, is it not possible that, in light of his achievement as a tragedian, there is more to his morality as a comedian than met Knights' eye?
The last difficulty, and surely the most interesting one, is a variation on the first two. Because of it, Ben Jonson, the titular hero of Professor Knights' book, is treated most curiously. He emerges, not so much as a victor or a victim, but simply as incomplete. Most critics would agree that Jonson's four greatest plays are Volpone, The Alchemist, Epicoene, and Bartholomew Fair. Knights devotes considerable attention to the first two and leaps over the last two, devoting only three short references to Epicoene, in one of which he calls it "pure entertainment," and none at all to Bartholomew Fair. Instead, he moves from The Alchemist to The Devil is an Ass, an interesting play, but hardly a major one. Why? A careful reading of these two plays reveals that they are inconvenient to Professor Knights' thesis. If Jonson is morally superior to his fellows because he presents in a brilliantly dramatic way "real" characters who demonstrate the folly and evil of materially acquisitive ways of life, what are we to do with a hero like Dauphine in Epicoene who is willing to use devious means to preserve a fortune yet to be inherited, and, an even more extreme case, heroes like Quarlous and Winwife of Bartholomew Fair who are self-admitted fortune hunters? Ignoring such problems seems to me prudent, but not necessarily wise.

There is yet a third assumption which grows as naturally out of the second as that one did out of the first.
I know of no serious critic who would be so presumptuous as to proclaim himself, *sui generis*, the final arbiter of literary morality with no outside reference. That is left for the book burners. The third assumption, then, is that the individual critic has discovered the dialectical tool which can be used to probe the moral depths of a work and its author. In the case of Knights, and those who have followed his lead in exploring the city plays, the continuing point of reference is to the moral beliefs, especially in the realm of economics, of the dramatist's audience. While he and his pupils admire language and plot, their ultimate interest is in the morally subtle changes which can be rung on these concerns. Since the first two assumptions I have described owe their validity to the soundness of the third, it is worth examining in some detail.

I

There is a very special relationship between a dramatist and his audience. With the possible exception of oral poetry, drama is probably the most public and therefore intimate form of literature. Aristotle's *Poetics* makes the paradox clear. Not only does he describe, with seeming objectivity, the plot development of *Oedipus Rex* and, with more questionable objectivity, the moral order to be deduced from it, but also the subjective response of Sophocles' audience. If such mass catharsis did or could occur in
Aristotle's ideal audience, the nineteenth-century anthropological studies which claimed that the drama grew out of religious rituals are to be believed. For an audience so described is a congregation rather than a mere assemblage of individuals bent on taking their aesthetic pleasure; they, through the author's creation and his agents' interpretation of it, partake of a shared emotional experience. In fundamentalist Christian hymns, as well as in Yale drinking songs, such a state is usually described as communion or fellowship.

Aristotle's extant work on the drama deals, of course, almost exclusively with tragedy. Other observers have noted similar religious roots to stage comedies and a similar congregational response to the plays which best fulfill (in a novel and intriguing way, of course) the audience's expectations. In what is still probably the best study of the religious origins of Greek comedy, Francis Cornford traces the patterns of Aristophanes' plays back to formulas used to depict seasonal changes in ancient folk rituals. Attempting to reconcile such rituals and modern, psychologically defined responses, Susan K. Langer writes about comedy in terms of "rhythm."

The same impulse that drove people, even in prehistoric times, to enact fertility rites and celebrate all phases of their biological existence, sustains their eternal interest in comedy.
A page earlier she describes the communal response of an audience to so old and ritualized a stimulus:

Real comedy sets up in the audience a sense of general exhilaration, because it presents the very image of "livingness" and the perception of it is exciting. Whatever the story may be, it takes the form of a temporary triumph over the surrounding world, complicated, and thus stretched out, by an involved succession of coincidences.\(^\text{13}\)

It remains for Northrop Frye, in his *Anatomy of Criticism*, to provide a description of the varieties of religious-aesthetic experiences available to playgoers:

As the final society reached by comedy is the one that the audience has recognized all along to be the proper and desirable state of affairs, an act of communion with the audience is in order. Tragic actors expect to be applauded as well as the comic ones, but nevertheless the word "plaudite" at the end of a Roman comedy, the invitation to the audience to form a part of the comic society, would seem rather out of place at the end of a tragedy. The resolution of a comedy comes, so to speak, from the audience's side of the stage; in a tragedy it comes from some mysterious world on the opposite side.\(^\text{14}\)

Tragedy, so described, tries to find significance in death and in the proper ways of dying; comedy offers a celebration rather than a wake: it finds its significance in fruitful couples rather than magnificent corpses. Both rituals, the celebration of life and the catechism of dying, are close to religious exercises, and the audiences respond accordingly.\(^\text{15}\)

What gives special weight to the assumptions quoted above is the curious history of the drama. Poetry, even when not widely popular or well patronized, continued to
be written and to be written well. The same is true of the novel, since it gained its ascendancy during the eighteenth century. Not so the drama. Though one of the oldest forms of literature, whole centuries have gone by without the production of a single memorable play, let alone a great one. During the few, relatively short periods of time when great drama flourished, not one, but a number of brilliant dramatists produced it. Such a history argues, not the rarity of dramatic genius, but the necessity of a special audience to nurture it. Without such an audience, capable of responding as a congregation, great drama is not usually created.

This symbiotic relationship between an author, his work, and his audience has significant implications for all students of the drama, including students of the Elizabethan-Jacobean drama. While it is not advised, scholar-critics devoted to other forms and other genres may slip past their writer’s original audience with a few well-chosen clichés. The drama student dare not take such liberties with so important a part of his subject. All literary scholars are creators of more or less plausible fictions. From an always too small amount of information, they must create an author and his work. The drama scholar is asked also to recreate an audience.
II

Anyone so engaged, if even mildly honest, would have to admit to the difficulty of such a task. Recreated authors and their works are already unstable compounds. Adding an additional element, a recreated audience, is not likely to enhance that stability, nor its synthesizer's reputation for probity. Moreover, while a work may be complex and an author indistinct, there is some solidarity to them. Barring the miraculous discovery of, say, a new quarto or some long-buried love letters, Hamlet and Shakespeare offer us the same enigmas they offered scholars fifty, one hundred, or even two hundred years ago. Audiences are more volatile. What kind of audiences, for instance, made Hamlet a popular play, but not quite as popular as Arden of Feversham or Mucedorus? Did the same audiences applaud Shakespeare's great tragedies while shouting some of Jonson's most intricate works from the stage? An audience, more than a playwright and his play, contains within itself any number of variables. To rediscover it properly, a scholar should have at his disposal a rational and systematic approach.

First of all, any writer interested in describing and analyzing a given playwright, play, and audience should be aware of his own intentions. It is to be assumed that, unless he is a most austere recorder of unassimilated and
necessarily incomplete "facts," he will be intent on justifying his own aesthetic opinions. Unfortunately, as I have already tried to show in the preceding paragraph, he cannot always depend on the combination of these three elements to support his own critical judgments. An author, if he does not usually satisfy, but has on a single or even a few occasions, can be described as "touched by genius" or "finding his proper subject, at last." A work which does not live up to its critic's standard for his author's general product can be pardoned because of its author's temporary state of immaturity or mental imbalance; it can be excused as his or her juvenilia or as a transitional work between masterpieces of different kinds. While the reconciliation of parts of an author or his works to the scholar's ideas of them may demand special pleading, at least it can be achieved. An audience, because its members are less definite, must either be congratulated by the critic or dismissed as unworthy.

To use Malthus' terms, critical problems faced by the recreator of a work or its author may increase according to an arithmetical ratio; the problems faced by the remaker of an audience increase according to a geometrical ratio.

First of all, at least since the Renaissance, when outbreaks of theatrical excellence crossed national boundaries, an assessment of the "spirit of the age" (or some other equally indistinct, but useful euphemism) must be made. This kind
of survey would have to include a telling of the economic, religious, scientific, political, and aesthetic atmospheres, and probably more. Secondly, specifically nationalistic considerations must be taken into account: despite the international climate of opinion which made dramatic flowerings possible all over Europe during the Renaissance, it is doubtful that Machiavelli's Mandragola or Calderón's Life Is a Dream would have been widely popular in Elizabethan London or that parts of those plays would have been so imitated as, say, the closet scene from Hamlet. 19 Thirdly, a nation's urban and rural population must be separated; though both contribute to the national climate of opinion, plays are almost always written to please the sophisticated city dweller. Fourthly, the urbanites themselves must be divided into audiences and non-audiences. Those actively opposed to the theater, at least in Elizabethan London, are easily discovered. They were the kind of people who agreed with their Lord Mayor when, in 1597, he described "The inconueniences that grow by Stage playes abowt the Citie of London." Theaters, in his opinion, were

the ordinary places for vagrant persons, Maisterles men, theives, horse stealers, whoremongers, Coozners, Conycatchers, contrivers of treason, and other idele and daungersous persons to meet together & to make their matches to the great displeasure of Almightye God & the hurt & annoyance of her Maistes people.20

Was this the audience King Lear and Volpone were written for? Elizabethan theatergoers, obviously, felt differently,
but saying that is not a very precise way of defining them. Finally, an audience must be broken down into several different audiences. During the English Renaissance, while they were not always mutually exclusive, there were at least four, and probably more, varieties.  

If the process of distillation I have outlined in the last paragraph would yield an authentic audience, ready and willing to respond communally as the critic feels it should to works he approves of or disapproves of according to his own aesthetic insights, its recreation, though tedious, would be worthwhile and a mere arithmetical problem. Unfortunately, historical evidence proves that such is not the case. In Renaissance Spain, during the theatrical reign of de Rueda, Cervantes, de Vega, and Calderón, Countess d'Aulnoy described a prominent theater critic in Madrid:

The finest comedy in the world (I mean those that are acted in the city) very often receives its fate from the weak fancy of some ignorant wretch or other. But there is one in particular, and a shoemaker, who decides the matter, and who hath gained such an absolute authority so to do, that when the poets have written their plays, they go to him, and as it were, sue for his approbation; they read to him their plays, and the shoemaker, with grave looks thereupon, utters abundance of nonsense, which nevertheless the poor poet is obliged to put up with; after all, if he happens to be at the first acting of it, everybody has their eyes upon the behaviour of this pitiful fellow; the young people, of what quality soever, imitate him. If he yawns, they yawn, if he laughs, so do they. In a word, sometimes he grows angry or weary, and then takes a little whistle and falls a-whistling; at the same time you shall hear a hundred whistles, which makes so shrill a noise, that it is enough to confound the heads of the spectators.
By this time our poor poet is quite ruined; all his study and pains having been at the mercy of a blockhead, according as he was in a good or bad humor.\textsuperscript{22}

In seventeenth-century France, Molière suffered the same kinds of indignities, but from a different source. Jacques Guicharnaud, in his introduction to Molière: A Collection of Critical Essays, says of the immediate response to his author's L'Ecole des femmes, "We are somewhat surprised today at the great wave of hostility provoked by that comedy." He credits so ill-natured a response, not to plebeian taste-makers, but to "the ill temper of the minor writers, the prudes' reaction to Molière's private life, and the pedants' indignation in the face of some twisting of the rules . . ."\textsuperscript{23}

Whether or not their audiences' critical tastes were determined by shoemakers, lesser poets, prudes, or critics, the Elizabethan-Jacobean dramatists, too, were the toast and prey of their paying customers. It is well known that some of Jonson's more prickly critical manifestoes and less brilliant plays were not well received.\textsuperscript{24} Such a response is understandable, perhaps even admirable if one approves of democracy even in matters of taste. But surely the synthesizing scholar, intent on notarizing the consummation of the union between author, play, and audience, should pause in the face of Robert Herrick's lines on Jonson and The Alchemist, one of his finest and most genial plays, and a
very important one for Knights' thesis. In the early lines of his poem, "Upon Master Ben. Johnson. Epigram.," he complains of the theater's decay since Jonson's death:

After the rare Arch-Poet Johnson dy'd  
The Sock grew loathsome, and the Buskins pride,  
Together with the Stages glory stood  
Each like a poore and pitied widowhood. . . .

Herrick's lament, however deeply felt, is conventional, and, while deploring the state of the theater now that Jonson is gone, seems to indicate the well-deserved popularity his plays enjoyed while the master was alive. Two later lines correct any such impression:

Such ignorance as theirs was, who once hist  
At thy unequal'd Play, the Alchymist.25

It would seem, then, that during this period of great dramatic flowering at least a few of the best plays were written despite their audiences rather than to fulfill their psychic needs.

Jonson, himself, acknowledged as much, this time humorously, in his Induction to Bartholomew Fair. He creates a scrivener to draw up a compact between the audience and himself: they may censure his play, but only to the value of the places they have purchased.

It is further agreed that every person here have his or their free-will of censure, to like or dislike at their own charge, the author having now departed with his right: it shall be lawful for any man to judge his six pen'orth, his twelve pen'orth, so to his eighteen pence, two shillings, half a crown, to the value of his place: provided always his place get not above his wit.
Jonson adds a further stricture to his covenant which at least implies the presence of shoemaker critics in London too.

It is also agreed, that every man here exercise his own judgment, and not censure by contagion, or upon trust, from another's voice, or face, that sits by him, be he never so first in the commission of his wit . . .  

And Jonson was not the only writer whose plays, later recognized as aesthetic masterpieces, received rough treatment at the hands of his congregation.  

Of course, the argument, as I have pursued it, must finally become absurd. An actual audience is probably impossible to recreate the morning after, let alone 350 years later. But such an exercise in reductio ad absurdum, in this particular case, seems to me instructive. During the English Renaissance a special climate of opinion existed which made possible the great plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. Jonson, Webster, Fletcher and Beaumont, and probably a good number of other, more reticent dramatists, had some of their better, or even best works attacked by their audiences. How can it be explained? Perhaps, though audiences were generally good, those particular audiences were unlucky ones. Perhaps, on that particular afternoon or evening, it was made up of simple-minded green-grocers like the one portrayed in Beaumont's The Knight of the Burning Pestle. Perhaps it was made up of foppish critics like the gallant in Day's Isle of Gulls or Fitzdottrel
in Jonson's *The Devil is an Ass*. Perhaps it was made up of whatever kind of people banished the players to the provinces in *Hamlet*. Perhaps the stars were unfortunate or the times were out of joint. Any of these "perhapses" might be true, but they are not much to build a critical theory upon.

**III**

Fortunately, though a few of them have indulged themselves in the creation of fictitious, ideal audiences, none of the previous writers on Elizabethan-Jacobean drama has been foolish enough to try to rediscover an actual group of people. Instead of worrying themselves over actual audiences, they have recreated probable audiences from what we have been able to find out about the mass of Elizabethans who might have frequented the theaters. How plausible their models are, and how well they explain the plays they are fitted to, also deserve close scrutiny.

There must have been, during the early years of the Restoration, any number of living men and women who could remember actual audiences at the Globe, at the Blackfriars, or at the Red Bull. Their testimonies as to the nature of those audiences were never solicited, despite the continuing popularity of Jonson, Shakespeare, Beaumont, and Fletcher. Even after that generation was safely dead no model audiences were created. By the time of Steevens and Malone, at the end of the eighteenth century, enough
documents had been collected to recreate an approximate Elizabethan-Jacobean audience. Except in the most hazy of generalizations, it was not created. The reasons for such neglect are obvious: on the one hand, as Knights would say, they were simply not interested; on the other, scrupulously reconstructed audiences might have interfered with the critical prescriptions of the day. It remained for scholars in the twentieth century, as much anthropologists as antiquarians, to create the one audience and finally the many. What we have gained from the studied neglect of, and the intense interest in such audiences tells us as much about the critics as about their subjects.

During the Restoration and the eighteenth century Elizabethan audiences were not treated very kindly. Dryden, so kind, in a left-handed way, to Shakespeare in his An Essay of Dramatic Poesy (1668), considers his own age more "refined." 28 Pope, a little further off, attempts to pardon Shakespeare's "errors" because of his audience's vulgar tastes and because of the company he was forced to keep--

the audience was generally composed of the meaner sort of people; and therefore the images of life were drawn from those of their own rank. . . .

It may be added, that not only the common audience had no notion of the rules of writing, but few even of the better sort piqued themselves upon any great degree of knowledge or nicety that way . . . 29

Samuel Johnson's deservedly famous Preface to Shakespeare provides a nice summation:
The English nation, in the time of Shakespeare, was yet struggling to emerge from barbarity. . . . The publick was gross and dark; and to be able to read and write, was an accomplishment still valued for its rarity.

. . . .

The mind, which has feasted on the luxurious wonders of fiction, has no taste of the insipidity of truth. . . . he that wrote for such an audience was under the necessity of looking round for strange events and fabulous transactions, and that incredibility, by which maturer knowledge is offended, was the chief recommendation of writings, to unskilful curiosity.30

During the Restoration and into the eighteenth century when rules, the French, and consequently, Jonson, Beaumont, and Fletcher were loved, the unruly Elizabethans were dismissed as unworthy. Shakespeare's audience was responsible for his errors, but not for his successes. He was regarded as some sort of wunderkind who had a secret compact with Nature and, most of the time, floated above the hurly-burly lives of his paying customers. (There is a wonderful bit of irony to be discovered in such a judgment. In their treatment of Shakespeare, these critics have shown that anything can be proven through an appeal to a higher authority, in this case Nature. So much for a rigid application of the "rules.")

Nineteenth-century scholar-critics did not really dispute this view of the Elizabethans; instead, they chose to venerate them, rather than denigrate them, for their very lack of sophistication. Rules, and for that matter, Jonson
and those of his ilk, lost their power to please during the last decades of the eighteenth century. What was wanted was not merely the work set against some arbitrary set of laws, no matter how venerable the parentage, but the living artist, the beating heart, the soul, "that mass of faculties and feelings which are the inner man," as Hippolyte Taine would have it.

What is your first remark on turning over the great stiff leaves of a folio, the yellow sheets of a manuscript,—a poem, a code of laws, a confession of faith? This you say, did not come into existence all alone. It is but a mould, like a fossil shell, an imprint, like one of those shapes embossed in stone by an animal which lived and perished. Under the shell there was an animal, and behind the document there was a man. The shell and the document are lifeless wrecks, valuable only as a clue to the entire and living existence. We must get hold of this existence, endeavour to re-create it. 31

Shakespeare could only do well in such an age, as the many scholars and "new" societies devoted to his discovery attest. But audiences, as made up of actual people, were not much helped. While a great deal of material was collected which certified their existence, they were treated by the major critics of the century either idealistically or in bits and pieces.

William Hazlitt described Shakespeare and his audience in this way:

He wrote for the 'great vulgar and the small' in his time, not for posterity. If Queen Elizabeth and the maids of honour laughed heartily at his worst jokes, the catcalls in the gallery were silent at his best passages, he went home satisfied, and slept the next night well. . . . He
was willing to take advantage of the ignorance of the age in many things, and if his plays pleased others, not to quarrel with them himself. . . . His barbarisms were those of his age. His genius was his own. He had no objection to float down with the stream of common taste and opinion: he rose above it by his own buoyancy, and an impulse which he could not keep under, in spite of himself, or others, and 'his delights did show most dolphin-like.'

Towards the end of the century J. A. Symonds summarized what had come to be the nineteenth-century notion of the Elizabethans:

It was one of those rare periods when the past and the future are both coloured by imagination, and both shed a glory on the present. The medieval order was in dissolution: the modern order was in the process of formation. Men stood, as it were, between two dreams—a dream of the past, thronged with sinister and splendid reminiscences: a dream of the future, bright with unlimited aspirations and indefinite hopes. Neither the retreating forces of the Middle Ages, nor the advancing forces of the modern era pressed upon them with the iron weight of actuality.

The passages quoted are fairly representative. The pictures they present remained the standard ones until the beginning of the First World War. Hazlitt gives us a bawdy queen and her equally coarse, but jolly female retinue. Symonds offers the other extreme, Miranda's brave new world seen through a glass lightly. It is not surprising that the nineteenth century offered up proposed epics on the model of gothic cathedrals, and critical theories based on touchstones.

There are reasons which would appear obvious to a psychologist for critics of both centuries to describe
Elizabethan audiences in the ways they did. The eighteenthcentury sons found their Elizabethan fathers crude and vulgar compared to themselves. Nineteenth-century critics found their fathers crude and vulgar, fox-hunting and ale-guzzling squires as Macaulay, in his *History of England*, would have them, but displayed a real fondness, though liberally shot through with condescension, for their quaint and vigorous grandfathers. Whether or not such psychological clichés provide accurate representations is hard to know. Probably, like most clichés, there is at least some truth to them. But they are not really very important to a study of this sort. The important point is that neither century was much interested in getting close to the Elizabethans. Instead, writers in both centuries used them as easy tools to be employed in whatever way would best satisfy their own critical theories, elevate or at least excuse their own favorite playwrights, and bring confusion on the heads of their scholarly enemies. In his notes to one of the first, mildly scientifically researched chapters on Elizabethan audiences, Ashley H. Thorndike tells us that that part of his essay "deals with a subject often discussed but on which there is little specific information." His book was first published in 1916. It is easy to forget that the critic, like the artist, recreates himself in his work, not only in his assessments of others' creations, but also in his choice of them and the audiences he creates for them.
It was left to the critics of this century to apply "rigorously scientific standards" to the study of such old audiences. Not so much how well it has been done, but how much it has profited us, is the next question to be answered.

This is not to say that there were no disagreements between the various collectors and assimilators of historical items. Indeed, the same documents were used to prove quite different things. The old argument, as to whether or not the audiences were benign or malignant, was preserved. On the simplest level, it was a matter of which documents were to be accepted. Should it be the works of Cosson, Stubbes, and (in a wonderfully perverse way) Sir Philip Sidney? Or should it be the works of such defenders of the theater as Chettle, Dekker, and Heywood? Occasionally, one suspects that the modern researcher's personal preferences rather than his or her objectivity had a say in the matter.

The pleasant debate, never joined, between M. St. Clare Byrne and F. P. Wilson, makes the difficulties faced by social historians of the period clear. Miss Byrne, though very fair-minded and exhaustive in her research, looks on the bright side of the age. She quotes, approvingly, the lavish compliments paid to London by visiting foreigners, who "were acquainted with various European countries and had standards of comparison." Professor
Wilson, perhaps because of his subject, the plague in London, views these same tributes with a more jaundiced eye:

Distinguished foreigners thought the houses of the City very handsome and the streets very clean, but distinguished foreigners were shepherded into the better quarters of the town. They were dazzled by the magnificent display of gold and silver in Goldsmith's Row, but they were not shown the more populous parishes in the liberties... and they were carefully screened from the eight out-parishes... These districts, some of which were outside the jurisdiction of the City, were far from being 'white and clean'. Instead of wide streets were to be found narrow lanes and alleys, and instead of handsome houses mean tenements where families of poor people were thickly crowded into small and dirty rooms. The suburbs were notorious for poverty and disease. They were the haunt of vice and the breeding-place of the plague.40

When Byrne's and Wilson's accounts are compared, we can only concede that both told the truth—not merely "according to their lights"—but the actual truth as well as we can know it without having been there.

Alfred Harbage's important study, Shakespeare's Audience, attempts to offer us a more balanced picture. The impression one is left with after reading Harbage's book, the one he wishes us to retain, is that the audiences at the Globe were representative of the whole of London society, very healthy, and, in the main, very decent.

I believe that Shakespeare's audience was a large and receptive assemblage of men and women of all ages and of all classes... cheerful and decent folk who had come singly, in mixed couples, in family parties, wearing their Sunday best. The place would be so quiet, despite the throng standing on the ground and packed along the benches in superimposed grandstands, that the chief intrusion
upon my nervous reflections would be the voices of the actors on the stage.

Such an audience "thrived for a time, it passed quickly, and its like has never existed since." They had an enormous impact on the authors who wrote to please them and Shakespeare did it best:

The height of the crest of quality measures the strength of the propulsive forces acting from below. These forces had their place of origin. They must have generated among Shakespeare's fellowmen, and they must have operated through his audience. How can we ignore this obvious reciprocity? If Shakespeare exerted the greatest power over the audience, it follows that the audience exerted the greatest power over him. It follows that he expressed it best.

The most important characteristic of such an audience was that it "was literally popular, ascending through each gradation from potboy to prince." This is a pleasant picture, and, perhaps, an accurate one. But does it tell us much of anything important about how Shakespeare came to create Hamlet, Othello, or King Lear?

Harbage is never naïve. He anticipated the attacks which would be directed against his version of the Elizabethan audience. Why, if a broad audience demands great artists, were there so few great movies made during the thirties and forties of our own century when almost everybody went to their local theater? Why did no new Shakespeare appear?

The moving picture clientele is truly universal. The Lord Chamberlain's Men barnstormed in the
provinces and acted in Whitehall. Moving pictures are shown in the backwoods and in the presidential mansion. In theory, at least, it is to Hollywood that we should look for new dramatic triumphs. But, unluckily, the moving-picture clientele does not compose an audience at all. It does not participate in the creation of a play, and its influence upon creative artists is exercised through deputies not of its own choosing. The true audience of a moving picture is a delegation of studio critics.\textsuperscript{42}

Films and picture tubes naturally promote a greater distance between audience and actor, and, therefore, between the audience and the writer. Certainly a jeering live audience would have a strong effect on a playwright—perhaps even as strong an effect as the hook had on unlucky vaudeville performers—not, incidentally, an entertainment enterprise noted for its aesthetic superiority. But the coolness of the medium cannot mask the fact that the cinema and television, like Shakespeare's theater, are very much commercial ventures. Whether to sell soap or to amass personal fortunes for seven partners, commercial ventures strive to please as many people as possible because that is the best way to turn a profit. The lamentable history of television programming, the first entertainment industry to employ at least a quasi-scientific method of determining the size of its audience for its various programs, does not speak well for Harbage's idealized mass audience. Too many decent shows struggle through their short seasons, wither, and die; too many aesthetic disasters become hardy perennials.
In our own century the best dramatists have seldom written for mass audiences, though they might, for pecuniary reasons, hope to attract a large following. Using techniques similar to those employed by Harbage, Louis B. Wright, and a host of others, but with more immediate information at hand, the latest of those now so popular surveys bent on discovering the great American mass found the median American to be a forty-one-year-old housewife—mother, married to a machinist, and living somewhere near Dayton, Ohio. Can it be that Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, and Edward Albee expended their sometimes considerable talents writing for an audience made up of people so normal in the best American sense? The plays they wrote do not make it seem likely.

It remains for Robert Ornstein to question most effectively, not only the assumptions, but even the methods of the recreators of historical audiences. In The Moral Vision of Jacobean Tragedy Ornstein agrees with Harbage that, "the dramatists communicated with their audiences in terms that their audiences could understand . . . "; in fact, "like most of their contemporaries they did not flinch from the commonplace." But that is only a beginning. As Ornstein tells us,

We must remember that the ethical and intellectual substance of a Jacobean tragedy includes more than the sum of ideas expounded or referred to in its pages. The dramatist's vision is also, and more importantly, expressed in character, in
plot, and in the total poetic impression of life which his play creates. If we are not sensitive to poetic and ironic nuance—if we do not see that the informing vision of a play transcends its explicit statements—we will make a naïve equation not only between the thought of a dramatist and the ideas of his characters but also between the thought of a dramatist and the commonplace assumptions of his audience. . . .

We would not dare apply this method of interpretation to modern drama lest we conclude that the key to the plays of Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller lies in the works of Norman Vincent Peale, an ethical psychologist more widely read, more widely imitated, and, we must assume, more influential than were Charron, Coeffeteau or La Primaudaye. To be sure, Dr. Peale sheds some light on the fates of Willy Loman and Blanche Dubois. They have no mustard seeds, no "Attitude of Gratitude"; they might both have been saved had they been more positive thinkers. We would not be surprised, moreover, to find startling resemblances between Dr. Peale's ideas and those expressed by Williams' and Miller's characters. Yet we must all agree that Williams' view of life and Miller's view of life are not Dr. Peale's.45

Ornstein's immediate antagonists are the other writers on Jacobean tragedy, but his generalizations and analogies can be applied as well to other Elizabethan specialists.

We have profited from the many historical studies made in this century, but the profit we have gained is not very much like the profit we expected. Because of the plethora of facts garnered from contemporaries and record offices we know a great many more details about the daily lives of the Elizabethans than did the critics in previous centuries. But does such knowledge give us the fine insights we sought in the first place—insights into what Ornstein calls the "dramatist's vision"—or does it only make us superior
makers of footnotes? While the proper editing of texts and the proper writing of footnotes is a high calling and an essential one, the knowledge needed to understand the proclivities and even the vocabulary of the average spectator at the Globe does not necessarily qualify the textual historian to explain Shakespeare's greatest achievements to the rest of us. I would suggest, finally, that Harbage's ideal audience, though scrupulously created according to the best scientific principles, was made, as the eighteenth and nineteenth-century audiences were made, to compliment the critic's own aesthetic and moral prejudices.

IV

Towards the end of his long and brilliant career T. S. Eliot said "criticism may be, what F. H. Bradley said of metaphysics, 'the finding of bad reasons for what we believe upon instinct, but to find these reasons is no less instinct.'" Harbage's and Knights' instincts led them to audiences, more and less concrete, not to prove their arguments, but to buttress them. Since their aesthetic judgments differ, it is not surprising that their audiences do too. Finally, their statements about Elizabethan-Jacobean audiences must be read against their own stated critical preferences.

Only a few sensation-seekers would disagree with Harbage's contention that Shakespeare was far and away the
greatest dramatist of his own period—though there might be some disagreement as to how far that far might be—and that he is probably the greatest dramatist ever to write in English, and even that he might well be the greatest dramatist ever to write in any language. Furthermore, it is agreed that Shakespeare wrote his own plays and that most, if not all, were meant for the Globe, a large public theater catering to a broad London clientele. It is only after such facts have been acknowledged that the accuracy of Harbage’s claims for his reconstructed audiences and their effect on the playwrights can be judged.

In *Shakespeare and the Rival Traditions* Harbage celebrates the dramatists who wrote for the public theaters at the expense of those who wrote for the private ones. He prefers them because, in their plays, there are more good people than bad:

In the nature of his median character, a dramatist reveals whether he thinks with Pelagius or Augustine. A census of the 775 classifiable characters in Shakespeare shows that the good outnumber the evil in the ratio of seven to three . . . . In the plays of Jonson, Marston, Chapman, Middleton, and the minor writers for the private theatres the ratio is more than reversed. . . . In Jonson and Middleton the servants and other background characters are as defective as the principals, and among the principles the winners are cleverer rather than better than the losers. On the other hand, a count would show that, in the total dramatis personae of the popular stage, the Shakespearean ratio of seven to three on the side of the angels holds good.47

This is a key passage in Harbage’s exhaustive study—as much for what it tells us about his own preferences as for the
information it gives us. He prefers the angels to the devils, the cardinal virtues to the deadly sins. As he proved, at least statistically, so did Shakespeare. As a result, he is able to cast Shakespeare's great mantle around the shoulders of the other public dramatists, the members of their audience, and--finally--his own.

Whether or not the other public dramatists deserve such fame by association is open to question. Thomas Heywood's best play, A Woman Killed with Kindness—eloquently defended by Harbage in another essay—serves better than most as an example of the kind of morality the playgoers at the public theater were willing to approve when a new play by Shakespeare was not being offered. It is a curious play. In the main action Mistress Anne is successively a bride, a wife, an adultress, and a corpse of her own making. She is seduced by her husband's best friend, the chief beneficiary of his hospitality. We are not prepared for her fall; it simply happens. Overwhelmed by a glut of kindness and Christian charity, her husband, Master Frankford, does not kill her when he discovers what she has done. He merely banishes her to his place in the country, never again to see his face or their children. Naturally enough, she starves herself to death. When she is safely beyond any hope of recovery, Frankford visits her, forgives her, calls her wife again, and proceeds to the making of a proper epitaph:
Frankford is the hero of the play, and his methods are applauded by Heywood, and, presumably, his audience.

The subplot complements the main plot in a perverse way. Just as unfaithfulness is punished in the main plot by a kind of suicide, a kind of faithfulness is rewarded by a rich marriage in the subplot. As a result of some accidental murders, Sir Charles Mountford suffers a stint in jail, bankruptcy, and, worst of all, his release from debtors' prison at the hands of his scornful enemy and the first causer of his miseries, Sir Francis Acton. The only wealth (Heywood's word) he and his sister have left is the family name, now stained because of his debt to Sir Francis, and his sister's virtue, still unstained. Naturally enough, at least in the world of this play, he decides to sacrifice the letter to redeem the former.

Char. Dost love me, sister? Wouldst thou see me live A bankrupt beggar in the world's disgrace, And die indebted to mine enemies? . . .

Susan. Till now I had thought y'had lov'd me. By my honour/(Which I have kept as spotless as the moon), I ne'er was mistress of that single doit Which I reserv'd not to supply your wants . . . .

Char. . . . What do I owe to Acton?

Susan. Why, some five hundred pounds . . . .
Char. . . . Sister, now resolve me:
What do you think (and speak your conscience)
Would Acton give, might he enjoy your bed?

Susan. He would not shrink to spend a thousand pound
To give the Mountford's name so deep a wound.

Char. A thousand pound! I but five hundred owe:
Grant him your bed; he's paid with interest so.
(V.i.11-46)

One would like to grant Heywood the benefit of the doubt
and assume that this exchange is ironic. After all, even
in Shakespeare's so-called problem plays, brothers do not
pimp for their sisters; Claudio wishes for a little less
virtue in Isabella, but to save his life, not his financial
integrity. But a reading of this play, and Heywood's other
works, reveals no touch of sardonic amusement in the face
of such a solution.

Susan agrees to her brother's proposal, but with an im-
portant qualification: she will stab herself to death at the
moment of consummation and this double penetration will pre-
serve her own notion of honor. Charles, enraptured by so
noble a solution, states that he will kill himself at the
same moment. In Heywood's plays life is cheap, but credit
ratings are dear. Sir Francis recognizes this superior
brand of virtue and declines the offered rape:

Franc. [Aside] Stern heart, relent,
Thy former cruelty at length repent!
Was ever known, in any former age,
Such honourable, wrested courtesy? (V.i.118-121)

At least in Heywood's and Harbage's eyes, apparently not.
Heywood has Sir Francis marry Susan, and everyone but poor Anne lives happily ever after.

Not everyone would be willing to accept such solutions as conspicuously moral ones. But Harbage's championing of them and Heywood does tell us something about his own predilections: Harbage is a man of the people; he approves the morality they approve; and he excoriates those who question their right to establish their system of moral values as the preeminent one, in fact, the only proper one.

Charles J. Sisson points out that most of those qualities with which Beaumont mockingly endowed his citizen-grocer--patriotism, personal pride, love of romance, and the rest--can, in the "spectateur représentatif," scarcely be considered undesirable.

We may say in the present case, quite apart from Beaumont's satirical use of them as spectators in The Knight of the Burning Pestle, that a grocer, his wife, and their young apprentice form as acceptable an epitome of Shakespeare's audience as any of the facts will warrant us to choose. . . . If Shakespeare wrote for such "a little cockney family as this," there must be some correspondence in quality between the plays and our sample three . . .

In Sisson's and Harbage's opinions, Beaumont would have written better plays had he written for such an audience rather than at their expense. It is an impossible argument. The Knight of the Burning Pestle is not King Lear anymore than A Woman Killed with Kindness is. But then, few plays meet that standard, even the others written by Shakespeare. Despite Shakespeare's superiority, Beaumont's play is no
mean achievement. In the opinion of most critics, it is superior to Heywood's, and probably more moral.\textsuperscript{51}

Harbage has made a leap of faith. He has conferred sainthood by association on those writers who helped to serve Shakespeare's congregation. He has branded as heretics those who did not write primarily for that audience. But, just as some of the public dramatists wear their halos slightly askew, some of the heretics have proven persuasive and have been canonized in their own right by other audience makers. Harbage recognizes this fact. Moreover, his uneasiness in the face of what he himself recognizes to be their achievements demonstrates the other weakness inherent in his and other audience recreators' methods. If Heywood and his less effectual brethren disturb Harbage's thesis from the one side, Jonson's brilliance resists it from the other. In a telling passage he commends Jonson as an artist and condemns him as a man, going so far in the latter process as to resurrect Edmund Wilson's old canard:

\begin{quote}
Our minds are left in some confusion. In view of Jonson's true literary distinction and monumental earnestness, it seems invidious to judge his work by standards it cannot meet; but the fact remains that his comedies are soulless, and of only the slightest ethical interest\ldots. We can at least understand why such a visitor to his dramatic world as Edmund Wilson should have described it as the projection of a mental malaise itemized in one of the more elementary psychoanalytical handbooks\ldots. These present remarks are not intended as an evaluation of Jonson's art, but only as a reminder that it is the last place to look for triumphs of spirit or intimations of a divine plan.\textsuperscript{52}
\end{quote}
The Lord giveth; the Lord taketh away. Jonson is granted "true literary distinction and monumental earnestness"—but his works are "soulless and of only the slightest ethical interest." Harbage's standards for what constitutes "triumphs of spirit" and "intimations of a divine plan" are so very personal that there is little point in debating him. It is enough to say that, while he may have demonstrated some connections between the more pedestrian plays of the period and popular moral assumptions, he did not prove that the greatest, or even the better achievements of the Elizabethan dramatists are attributable to the influence of the specifically realized audience he has given us.

Knights' audience is at once more subtly conceived and less distinct than Harbage's. It is best defined by what it is not. It is not made up of the "new men" or those who approve of their economic practices. Jonson is to Knights what Shakespeare is to Harbage. Middleton provides the same sort of stumbling block to his thesis Jonson offered Harbage's. I have already quoted Knights on what he perceived to be Middleton's failure. "Middleton tells us nothing at all about these as individuals in a particular place and period. . . . And the obvious reason, it seems to me, is that he was not interested in doing so."\(^53\) This piece of reasoning is ingenious, but hardly up to Knights' usual standard. Knights himself recognizes the difficulties Middleton causes him and his thesis: "that he [Middleton]
was an almost exact contemporary of Jonson warns us against a rigid interpretation of any period, and suggests the limits to which an enquiry into the effects of environment on personality can be profitably pursued.\textsuperscript{54} Such honesty is refreshing.

In the most recent full-length study of Jacobean city plays Brian Gibbons alters Knights' conception of the audience only slightly, but in his hands this same audience helps explain not only Jonson's genius, but also Middleton's and Marston's.\textsuperscript{55}

Other literary historians have seen fit to justify the ways of assorted Caroline dramatists as understandable responses to their more supposedly refined audiences.\textsuperscript{56}

Where are we then? It would seem that every possible aesthetic judgment can be, and has been, proven through references to reconstructed audiences. Mark Eccles, in a review of Gibbons' book, finally dismisses the whole method in a pair of testy, but understandable, sentences:

It would have been kinder to the reader to throw overboard Chapters 2 and 3, which are cleverly called "A Fountain Stirr'd" and "The Approaching Equinox" to conceal the fact that they deal with the social and economic background and with the Jacobean constitutional conflict. Warmed-over economic history is no more illuminating now than it was when Knights dragged it into \textit{Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson}.\textsuperscript{57}

Robert Ornstein is not willing to say "dragged," but he does, in his brilliant first chapter, "Tragedy and the Age," point out not only the fallacies inherent in audience-mongering,
but also the fallacy of trying such a method in the first place. To take his last point first, he reminds us of something often stated, but seldom understood:

The mystique of Shakespeare's "popularity" has grown up because though we talk constantly of the need to read Elizabethan plays as works of the theater, we constantly ignore the unique magic of the stage. To be popular a novelist must pitch his art to the level of popular understanding and taste. A dramatist, however, need not rely on the untutored literary abilities of the "average man," for his intention will be realized on the stage by skilled professionals; his art will be interpreted for a popular audience in a way that the audience could not interpret it for itself. We may reasonably assume that for every hundred Elizabethans who could appreciate Hamlet in the theater; there were only a few who, without seeing a performance, could have grasped Shakespeare's intention from the printed page. Similarly today the theater is the one common meeting ground of literary genius and the mass audience.

The history of the drama confirms Ornstein's observations, if any such confirmation is necessary. At the same time, it demonstrates how slippery plays are. Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes won prizes for plays no less heretical in their way than the dialogues which cost Socrates his life. On the other hand, Ibsen's Nora slammed the door heard all over Europe. Yet Ibsen's ideas were not new when he presented them. They were part of the intellectual baggage carried by the few who had read Mary Wollstonecraft and the slightly larger number who were familiar with the works of John Stuart Mill and his continental counterparts. Despite of, or because of his notoriety, Ibsen flourished.
Jeremy Colliers, it seems, may complain, but they seldom prosecute. A play is at once more immediate and startling than a dialogue or a monograph—and at the same time, less objectionable, because more ambiguous, to professional moralists.  

Ornstein is not hostile to audience-makers; he merely reminds us that the method "does not distinguish the inspired fraction from the pedestrian 'norm' of dramatic entertainment," and, as a result, "it is most accurate in its description of pedestrian playwrights and most dubious when it attempts to force the greater playwrights into Procrustean categories." It follows, then, that

we cannot correctly interpret the great Elizabethan artists if, like unimaginative Elizabethan thinkers, we believe that ideas are authoritative because they are repeated endlessly by writers incapable of original thought. We must temper our admiration for the community of Elizabethan beliefs by an awareness that the most vital and stimulating ideas of any age are often the uncommon ones, those which are fresh and original and not yet grown commonplace.

Furthermore,

the most creative minds of the Renaissance were closer to each other in spirit than they were to unimaginative and uncreative minds. Similarly the common bond of their genius transcended and annihilated the supposed divisions between the great dramatists. Although we may attempt to make sharp ideological distinctions . . . we cannot say that the dramatists were very conscious of belonging to alien traditions.  

What Ornstein has to say is, on the face of it, so obvious, that it is astonishing he has to say it. There is a wonderful sense of weariness in his first chapter: he is not so
much a hostile critic of other critics as an almost, but
not quite, endlessly patient pedagogue correcting the er-
rors of children, children not so much recalcitrant as en-
thusiastically wrong-headed.

What can we know about the Elizabethan, Jacobean, and
Caroline audiences, then? We know that they were sensitive
to words, and not just any words, but the rich and ambigu-
ous ones the Renaissance writers and playwrights thrived
on. We know that whatever ordinary people, living their
ordinary lives, felt or thought, changes, revolutionary at
least in retrospect, were occurring in the social, political,
religious, and economic spheres. We know that the old or-
ganic, theologically defined world view was grudgingly giv-
ing way (though probably in a less spectacular fashion than
we imagine) to a new mechanistic, scientifically described
notion of the way things work—and we can assume that at
least some audience members were perplexed, and possibly
appalled by such a transition. Beyond that, except for
their daily habits, which are important but not crucial to
our understanding of the dramatists' moral purposes, we
cannot know anything at all.

What can we know about the critics who base their aes-
thetic judgments on the tastes and moral sensibilities of
reconstructed Elizabethan audiences? We know that though
they were privy to the same information, they did not come
to the same conclusions. We have a right to suspect that
predetermined aesthetic conclusions affected their arrangement of the evidence.

Furthermore, to return to the starting point in this essay, such differing aesthetic judgments are based on what D. H. Lawrence claimed, and Knights accepted as the most important function of art--the definition of what is moral. But it is the critic's notion of what is moral, not the artist's. We have come full circle. There is no place else we could have ended using such a method.

The only way to understand the values presented in the plays themselves is to see them for what they are--plays, complex verbal structures meant to be acted on the stage before a live audience. No sociological or economic or historical analysis, however fascinating, will give us as good an account of what these plays are and what, though the term is presently unfashionable, they mean. While historical information cannot be ignored (and I have not done so), it seems to me that the best approach to these plays is to be gained by employing the techniques associated with the now not so new new critics, the myth and symbol critics, and the genre theorists. That is what I have attempted to do in this study.
NOTES

INTRODUCTION


3See, for instance, the assessment of their relative merits and the evidence he submits to support it in Brian Gibbons, Jacobean City Comedy (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard Univ. Press, 1968). See especially chapter one, "City Comedy as a Genre."


5Knights, p. 268.

6Knights, p. 266.

7Knights, p. 196.

8A great deal has been written about "catharsis," what it means and how it works. The most satisfying treatment of the term I have been able to find, etymologically, psychologically, and aesthetically, is the one given in S. H. Butcher's admirable translation of, and commentary on the Poetics, Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art, 4th ed. (1911; rpt. New York: Dover, 1951), pp. 242-273. Butcher's first version appeared in 1897.


9The nearest equivalent to be found today is the rock concert. When climatic moments are reached, the entire congregation rises to its feet and female members of the


13 Langer, p. 348.


15 At least since Luigi Pirandello's *Right You Are If You Think You Are* (1916) and *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921), and probably much before then, modern dramatists in Europe and the Americas have again been experimenting with ways to involve the members of their audiences in the actions of their plays. It could be argued that the polite "parlor" settings of the late 19th and early 20th centuries were carefully constructed to include their spectators, but as voyeurs rather than as participants. Most recently, the invitations sometimes proffered audiences at nude musicals and reviews to disrobe and join the cast for the closing song might be a new version of the Roman practice Frye describes (p. 164) in which bits of food were thrown to the audience. Considering the nature of the invitation, it might be meant to take us back to an even older rite. For another version of this idea of the theater, see Lionel Abel, *Metatheatre* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1963). Early Renaissance theater, too, sometimes offered its audiences such items as "buttercups," "comfits," "white bread," "pears," "apples," and, for good measure, a dash of fireworks. See M. C. Bradbrook, *The Rise of The Common Player* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1962), p. 97.

16 For the best reading of *Arden of Feversham* and the reasons for its appeal, see Madeleine Doran, *Endeavors of*
Art (1954; rpt. Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1964), pp. 350-352. If printing history provides any indication of popularity, Mucedorus, another anonymous, and even less distinguished play, must have been the most popular play of the period. It was published seventeen times (with additions after the first three printings) between the years 1598 and 1668. Not surprisingly, later advocates for both plays, on the basis of no evidence at all, tried to claim Shakespeare as their author.

17 Jonson's many quarrels—with his audiences, with his fellow dramatists, and even with those, who, in the manner of Lord Chesterfield and another Johnson, seemed to be his patrons—are well known. For a concise history of these quarrels, see C. H. Herford and Percy Simpson, eds., Ben Jonson: The Man And His Work (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925), I, 1-127. See especially pp. 23-31, 36-40, 46-47, 57-63, and 91-102. Herford and Simpson claim that Volpone, at least, was universally admired (p. 43). The evidence they present is not that conclusive.

18 None of the great national theaters seems to have influenced any of the others to any significant degree. To explain the sudden, separate flourishing, we must depend on works about each of them and on the general classics, like Burkhardt's, on the Renaissance temperament.


20 Quoted in Edmund K. Chambers, The Elizabethan Stage (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923), IV, 322. As Alfred Harbage has noted, such annual laments by respective Lord Mayors since at least 1594 achieved an almost ritualized form: "A form indictment seems to have been kept on hand, and the creative instinct of the copyist confined to the spelling." Shakespeare's Audience (1941; rpt. New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1964), pp. 7-8.

21 Harbage finds three major ones: "there was the genteel audience of the private theatres; there was the plebeian audience of such theatres as the Red Bull and perhaps the Fortune after the private houses had filched the gentry away; and then there was that audience both genteel and plebeian, or neither, of the nineties and, because of its peculiar prestige, of the Globe in the early decades of the seventeenth century" (p. 90). To these could be added any number of minor variations: the Court audiences, the Inns
of Court audiences, and the University audiences, plus many combinations of the above. Besides his Shakespeare's Audience, see also Harbage's As They Liked It (1947; rpt. New York: Torchbooks-Harper, 1961) and Shakespeare and the Rival Traditions (New York: Macmillan, 1952). See also chapters IV ("The Creation of the Common Audience" and XII ("The Private Audience; Collegiate Revels at the University") of M. C. Bradbrook's The Rise of the Common Player.


24 A rather extensive literature has grown up on the subject. See, first of all, Jonson's own statements and the extensive commentaries on them in Herford and Simpson, I, 273-441 and throughout vol. II. See also Barish's introductory essay in Jonas Barish, ed., Ben Jonson: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963), pp. 7-13. For a wonderfully splenetic defense of Jonson against his many attackers up to the 19th century, see the first two sections, "Memoirs of Jonson" and "Proofs of Jonson's Malignity," in William Gifford, The Works of Ben Jonson (London, 1816), I, i-coxlviii. A notion of Gifford's style may be gotten from this sentence, early in the work:

The reader, therefore, who has the courage to follow me through these pages, must be prepared to see many of his prejudices overthrown, to hear that he has been imposed upon by the grossest fabrications, and, (however mortifying the discovery may prove,) that many of those who have practised on his integrity and surprised his judgment, are weak at once and worthless, with few pretensions to talents, and none to honest. (pp. i-ii)


Gifford records the many commendatory verses offered up to Jonson on the occasion of Volpone's publication. Some of them seem to me to indicate that Volpone was not universally well received. In compliments like these, separating the conventional from the actual responses is difficult. See Gifford, pp. cccxix-cccxxv.


27 See Shakespeare's Audience, pp. 122-149.


39 Byrne, p. 33.


41 Shakespeare's Audience, pp. 158-160.

42 Shakespeare's Audience, pp. 166-167.

43 Of the many studies detailing the habits and tastes of "representative" Elizabethans, Wright's account is probably the most comprehensive. See his Middle-Class Culture in Elizabethan England (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1935).

Ornstein, pp. 6-7.


Shakespeare and the Rival Traditions, pp. 172-173.

For his justification of the less believable scenes, see Shakespeare and the Rival Traditions, pp. 206ff and 249ff.

A Woman Killed with Kindness (V.v.97-101) in Hazleton Spencer, ed., *Elizabethan Plays* (Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, 1933), p. 630. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from this play are taken from this text.

Shakespeare's Audience, p. 155. Charles J. Sisson's quotation is from *Le Gout public et le theatre elisabethain jusqu'a la mort de Shakespeare* (Dijon, 1922), pp. 52-65.


Knights, p. 258.

Knights, p. 269.

See especially chapters 2 and 3, *Jacobean City Comedy*, pp. 32-60.


Mark Eccles, "Recent Studies in Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama," *SEL*, 9 (Spring, 1969), 373-374. Eccles is not completely fair; Gibbons' subtitles make clear the subject of his chapters.

Ornstein, p. 8.
59 Compare the thesis offered in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879), if thesis is not too gross a term, to ideas advanced by Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of The Rights of Woman* (1792) to be found in *A Vindication of The Rights of Woman*, ed. Charles W. Hagelman, Jr. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1967) and treated again, and more extensively, in John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor, "Early Essays on Marriage and Divorce" (1832), Harriet Taylor Mill, "Enfranchisement of Women" (1851), and John Stuart Mill, "The Subjection of Women" (1869). These last three essays can be found in Alice S. Rossi, *Essays on Sex Equality* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1970).

60 Ornstein, pp. 10-12.
CHAPTER ONE

JACOBEAN CITY COMEDY: AN INTRODUCTION

Thomas Middleton's *A Trick to Catch the Old One* begins with a wonderfully perverse scene, a scene which defines the play and makes it one of the best early examples of the kind of comedy which dominated the Jacobean stage during its first and most fruitful decade.\(^1\) Witgood, a ruined prodigal too wordly-wise to repent at the feet of an uncle not likely to kill the fatted calf,\(^2\) is a typical comic hero of this new order. Equally important, the world he must conquer is nothing like the earlier English comic worlds presented on the stage: the forest of Arden, the country fair loved by the fair maid of Fressingfield, or even the London of *A Shoemakers' Holiday*. Neither is it the simplistically divided world of court and city so important to Massinger and many of the Carolinian dramatists. Witgood must make his way in the amorphous and usually carnivorous version of the City theatrically popular during the early Jacobean period.

(Admittedly, his London, like the Londons of *Michaelmas Term*, *The Alchemist*, *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, and *Bartholomew Fair* is stylized--dependent on a more than literal reproduction of special seasons, neighborhoods, and catastrophes.\(^3\) Still, it is the London preferred by Jonson and Middleton, the best writers of urban comedy during its decade.)

It is my purpose in this essay to examine some of the best goodwits and the comic worlds they inhabit as presented
by Middleton during the first half of James I's reign. Despite some protests, it seems to me that the plays in question belong to a special species of the comic genus. They are usually called Jacobean City Comedies.

Witgood opens A Trick with a remarkable soliloquy:

WITT-GOOD. All's gone! still thou'rt a Gentleman, that's all; but a poore one, that's nothing: What Milke brings thy Meadowes forth now? where are thy goodly Up-lands and thy Downe-lands, all sunck into that little pitte Lecherie? why should a Gallant pay but two shillings for his Orndy that nourishes him, and twenty times two for his Brothell that consumes him? but where's Longacre? in my Uncles conscience, what is 3. yeares voyage about; he that setts out upon his conscience, nere finds the way home againe, he is either swallowed in the quicksands of Law-quillits, or splits upon the Piles of a Praemunire; yet these old Foxe-brain--and oxebrowde Uncles, have still defences for their Avarice, and Apologies for their practises, and will thus greete our follyes.

Hee that doth his youth expose,
To Brothell, drinke, and danger,
Let him that is his neerest Kinne,
Cheate him before a stranger.

And that's his Uncle, 'tis a principle in Usury; I dare not visit the Cittie, there I should bee too soone visited, by that horrible plague my Debts, and by that meanes I loose a Virgins love, her portion and her Vertues, well, how should a man live now, that ha's no living; hum? why are there not a million men in the world, that onely sojorne upon their braine, and make their wittes their Mercers; and am I but one amongst that Million and cannot thrive upon't; any Trick out of the compasse of Lawe now, would come happily to me.\(^5\)

Many of the elements which characterize Jacobean City Comedy are present in this speech.

The best way to know Witgood is to set him against his comic predecessors. His problem is a familiar one: he is a youthful lover denied his "virgin's love, her portion,
and her virtues" by older, materially more successful, and, as a result, more powerful men. His, according to Northrop Frye, is the archetypal comic predicament for young lovers:

Dramatic comedy, from which fictional comedy is mainly descended, has been remarkably tenacious of its structural principles and character types. . . .

The plot structure of Greek New Comedy, as transmitted by Plautus and Terence, in itself less a form than a formula, has become the basis for most comedy, especially in its more highly conventionalized dramatic form, down to our own day. . . . What normally happens is that a young man wants a young woman, that his desire is resisted by some opposition, usually paternal, and that near the end of the play some twist in the plot enables the hero to have his will.6

Frye goes on to describe this standard lover and his intended:

The technical hero and heroine are not often very interesting people: the adulescentes of Plautus and Terence are all alike, as hard to tell apart in the dark as Demetrius and Lysander, who may be parodies of them. Generally the hero's character has the neutrality that enables him to represent a wish-fulfilment.7

His situation fits this prescription, but Witgood does not. As his opening soliloquy indicates, he is hardly the attractive, but dull-witted lover common to the plays of Menander, Plautus, and Terence; nor is he like the later versions of these cyphers brought to perfection by Molière and Marivaux.8 One recent scholar has discovered a connection between Plautus's Persa and A Trick which is interesting, if not
totally convincing, but even she does not insist on similarities shared by the romantic leads in both plays.\(^9\)

Classical New Comedy, like French neo-classical comedy after it, gave all the wit to a trustworthy and conniving slave or servant. Romantic leads were allowed only appealing but ineffectual sentiments. Witgood is made of sterner stuff. Unlike Molière's Leander, who is witlessly and totally dependent on his rascally valet, Scapin, Witgood conceives and executes his own tricks, and, in the process, even succeeds in duping the near-respectable into aiding and abetting him.

As a lover ready to begin his venture depending on his own abilities rather than those of a rascally slave or tricky servant, Witgood bears a slight resemblance to the questing heroes of medieval love tales and, more importantly, the comic romances and romantic comedies so popular from Lyly through the early Shakespeare. A particularly ingenious critic, with a strong Freudian bent, might even be able to "prove" that all romantic quests stem from the same psychological longings, and that all obstacles, be they witches, dragons, older and richer rivals or even heavy fathers, represent only different manifestations of the universal but unacknowledged Death Wish. But what would be the point? Witgood, like his more virtuous brethren, is off on a quest of sorts and the City he must brave is probably as dangerous as any enchanted forest or giant's
castle. Moreover, his goal, "a virgin's love . . . and her virtues," is an honorable one. It is the third part of that which he desires, "her portion," which places him beyond the pale of so august a company. It is hard to imagine Lancelot or Endimion or Orlando carefully calculating the financial resources of his inamorata.

Witgood should finally be measured against a third kind of comic lead, the romantic (in a different sense of the word) rogue so popular in the cony-catching pamphlets and jest books of the late Elizabethan and early Jacobean periods and so very different from the civalric heroes of the comic-romances.¹⁰ One scholar has discovered what might be a direct connection between A Trick and a book by one of Middleton's most brilliant and dissolute predecessors, the Merrie Conceited Jests of George Peele.¹¹ Even if Miss Christian's contention could be disproved, which it cannot, Middleton was obviously aware of the available literary rogues and, on occasion, did make use of them, their special vocabularies, and their vicious practices.¹² Indeed, Barber's introduction to the play contains a recitation of Witgood's sharp practices which would seem to place him wholly in the camp of the scoundrels:

All the main characters in the play are rogues. Witgood recovers his whole estate (not merely the part of it to which Lucre has to real right); he gets his debts paid by Hoord (who has never harmed him); he cheats his creditors, for they are paid less than 13s. 4d. in the pound, when in fact he has his estate back and could discharge
his debts in full; and he marries off his mistress to Hoord, so that he himself can marry a portion of 1000. He has learnt how to get on in the world.13

But, as Barber, himself, shows, there are very real differences between Witgood and your standard rogue.

The first widely popular cony-catching pamphlet, Robert Greene's A Notable Discovery of Cozenage Now Daily Practised by Sundry Lewd Persons Called Cony-Catchers and Crossbiters, appeared in 1591. It is dedicated to "the young gentlemen, merchants, apprentices, farmers, and plain countrymen."14 Whether or not Greene was as cynical as later scholars pictured him,15 his dedication does offer us a very clear view of the audience he wrote for. Though, according to his own testimony, the ranks of the wicked were swelling at an alarming rate, his pamphlet described a small world of villains; his purpose was to protect the honest, law-abiding many from the dishonest few. Fourteen years later,16 the opposite was the case, at least as depicted in popular literature. In Witgood's world it is the law-abiding many who are dishonest, for the law itself has been perverted. The greatest criminals are those most able to use the law to their own advantage--the merchants, the clergymen, and especially the moneylenders, lawyers and magistrates. The Witgoods and their ilk, though more closely resembling Jesse James than Robin Hood, become heroes because
they can beat the corrupt members of the establishment at their own game. Their enemies ennable them.

Behind the intricate plots common to most comedies there is a supreme and benevolent order which suffers for a time the heavy fathers, the usurping uncles, even the witches and the dragons. In the archetypal "realistic" comedies Frye describes, this order exerts a mysterious force (whose chief agents seem to be resourceful servants and remarkable coincidences) which ultimately gives the young their procreative Eden at the expense of the rigid, but not usually criminal, old. Romantic comedies also end celebrating this benign order. In plays of this kind the forces set against youthful lovers may be authentically evil; but they are so patently non-realistic, often even allegorical, that they yield in the end to miraculous conversions. Because this order is at last recognized as not only proper but pre-eminent even by the comic villains, the whole cast, after some wrist-slapping, can be invited to the final comic festival celebrating its restoration.

No such order stands behind the Jacobean City Comedies. In a brilliant litotes, Frye compares the movement from a perverse society to a desirable one in comedy to the actions and just resolution of a law case. Borrowing from "a little pamphlet called the Tractatus Coislinianus, closely related to Aristotle's Poetics," he adopts the terms 

"These correspond
roughly to the usurping and the desirable societies respectively.\(^{19}\) At the beginning of a stage comedy the usurping society \((pistis)\) is in control; at some indefinite point in the past it supplanted the desirable society \((gnosis)\), which is usually described in terms associated with a pastoral golden age, an age in which everyone was young, beautiful, musically inclined and remarkably fertile. The usurping society is ruled by the old, the rigid, and, most important, the legalistic. The events of the play "prove" the illegitimacy of such a state of affairs, and, at the end of the trial, the ancien régime is restored. In comedies like \textit{A Trick gnosis} never really replaces \textit{pistis}.

Only a few achieve membership in the desirable society, and they must earn their happiness or fall into it without the help of some external and perfect ordering principle.\(^{20}\) In Jacobean city comedies the usurping society is the real one: the sharpwits can succeed in it and perhaps escape it, at least for awhile,\(^{21}\) but they cannot make it go away.

The real cony-catchers in \textit{A Trick to Catch the Old One} are, of course, Hoard and Lucre, and in a cameo role, the most vicious and meteorically successful member of the New Elite, Harry Dampit, "a trampler of time." L. C. Knights, in \textit{Drama \\& Society in the Age of Jonson}, describes characters like these as representatives of the "New Men."\(^{22}\) They are the darlings of the brave new world of the London bourgeoisie. They make the rules, they manipulate them,
and they flourish by them. It is their "world" Witgood must operate in.

Lucre is nicely limned in Witgood's opening soliloquy. The prodigal's fertile, green world, his "Long-acre," is lost in

my Uncles conscience, which is 3. yeares voyage about; he that setts out upon his conscience, nere finds the way home againe, he is either swallowed in the quicksands of Law-quillits, or splits upon the Piles of a Praemunire . . .

Witgood's "Foxe-braind" uncle is not only capable of making the law a Scylla and Charybdis which careless, well-heeled young gentlemen must try to pass between; he is willing to extend special courtesies to those closely related to him:

these old Foxe-braind—and oxex-browe Uncles, have still defences for their Avarice, and Apologies for their practices, and will thus greete our follyes.

Hee that doth his youth expose,
To Brothell, drinke, and danger,
Let him that is his nearest Kinne, Cheate him before a stranger.

Even the most casual reader of a Shakespeare play would be forced to recognize the moral significance of such terms as "natural" and "unnatural" to Englishmen of the Renaissance. According to Witgood's quatrain, Lucre is not merely unnatural in the sense, say, of Edmund in his "Now, gods, stand up for bastards" speech; he is perverse, a minor Iago.

Middleton vilifies Lucre, Hoard, Dampit, and the others like them with more than a quatrain. There is an air of sexual desiccation about them. Lucre is not only
"Foxebraind," but also "oxe-browde," a common adjective used to describe a cuckold. 

More important, Lucre's "Law-quillits" and "Piles of Praemunire" have, temporarily, destroyed the fertile possibilities of "Long-acre." (When in doubt, the sober reader of Middleton should assume that almost every double entendre he or she discovers was intended.) The milk from the meadows, the goodly uplands and downlands--all have been consumed by Witgood's conscienceless uncle. On a more immediate sexual level, Witgood cannot go to the city to gain his "Virgins love" because of "that horrible plague my debts." Both his desired object and the disease metaphor he uses to describe the obstacles between him and it are instructive. The metaphoric opposition between the young, the moist, the fruitful and the old, the blighted, and the barren will remain a constant throughout the play. It provides the best clue to whatever social and moral judgments the author intended his audience to make.

Not that Witgood, as he appears in his opening soliloquy, is capable of taking advantage of the natural gifts of the young. He has learned enough of his enemies so that he can identify, quite accurately, the course he must pursue:

well, how should a man live now, that ha's no living; hum? why are there not a million of men in the world, that onely sojourn upon their braine, and make their witte their Mercers; and am I but one amongst that Million and cannot thrive upon't; any Trick out of the compasse of the Lawe now, would come happily to me.
But his opening lines make him sound more like a penitent than a gay boulevardier ready to take the town by storm and, in the process, gain a fruitful virgin and regain his productive green world.

All's gone! still thou'rt a Gentleman, that's all; but a poore one, that's nothing: What Milke brings thy Meadowes forth now? where are thy goodly Up-lands and thy Downe-lands, all sunck into that little pitte Lecherie? why should a Gallant pay but two shillings for his ordnary that nourishes him, and twenty time two for his Brothell that consumes him?

Witgood's confusion as to who robbed him is most apparent in these lines in his treatment of "that little pitte Lecherie."

"All's gone ... all sunck into that little pitte Lecherie"--here, shrunk into a little phrase, is all the hortatory wisdom of a thousand sermons and homiletic nostrums, shouted or whispered, since man first learned the joys of denial. The "little pitte," obviously, is the female pudenda. The question is whether it is the gateway to heaven or to hell. At this point in the play, Witgood opts for the latter; in so doing, he joins his enemies rather than his natural allies. (His choice is hardly remarkable; even the word pudendum, pudenda is a gerundive of pudere: to be ashamed.) In Witgood's view, the pit has swallowed all of his productive potentiality and offered no return. He cannot succeed with so sterile an attitude.

The necessary change in his attitude comes about when he realizes the absurdity of the role he has assumed--that
it is, in fact, a role. Immediately after his opening soliloquy, his mistress enters:

CURTIZAN. My love.

WITT-GOOD. My lothing; hast thou beene the secret consumption of my purse? and now comst to undo my last meanes, my wits? wilt leave no vertue in me and yet thou nere the better? hence Curtizan, round webd Tarantula; That dryest the Roses in the cheekes of youth. (I.1.27-32)

It is hard to imagine even a wronged Victorian or a cartoon father presented with an irregularly conceived grandchild responding so vehemently to a friendly greeting. Given the role forced on her, the Courtesan replies in kind:

I have been true unto your pleasure, and all your lands thrice rackt, was never worth the Jewell which I prodigally gave you, my virginity; Lands morgag'd may returne and more esteemde, But honesty once pawnd, is nere redeemd. (I.1.33-37)

It is to Witgood's credit (and Middleton's design) that he recognizes immediately his own foolishness and his mistress's necessarily foolish response.

The figurative language both have used belongs to the world of Hoard and Lucre and Dampit. In his speech, Witgood compares his ripe mistress to the "round webd Tarantula." Their sexual congress "dryest the Roses in the cheekes of youth." She responds by putting a very high price on "that little pitte": it is "the Jewell which I prodigally gave you, my virginity." With a dying fall, she describes her present condition: "honesty once pawnd, is nere redeemd."
As long as they choose to value themselves and their activities according to the coin of their enemies, there is no hope for them.

Fortunately, when Witgood recognizes that both he and his former mate have been talking legalistic nonsense, he also recognizes that "that little pitte" can be his way to renewed fertility, rather than the hot entrance to hell. She is his "best invention"; all his "means" he must "derive" from her. The procreative metaphors they bandy about, after he has made his drift clear to her, are revealing:

CURTIZAN. From me! be happy then,
What lies within the power of my performance,
Shall be commanded of thee.

WITT-GOOD. Spoke like an honest drab ifaith, it may prove som-thing, what Trick is not an Embrion at first, until a perfect shape come over it.

CURTIZAN. Come I must helpe you, where abouts left you,
Ile proceed.
Tho you beget, tis I must helpe to breed,
Speake what ist, Ide faine conceive it. (I.1.49-58)

Their metaphorical coupling will beget the trick necessary to regain the green world.

Set directly against Witgood and his new fruitful paramour are the emblematic usurers Harry Dampit and his "fellow Cater-piller," Gulf. Before Richard Levin's article, "The Dampit Scenes in A Trick to Catch The Old One," their appearances were usually described as excrescences upon the body of the play. Levin established their legitimacy, but
he did not go far enough in describing their symbolic importance to the moral scheme of the play. Harry Dampit is both a "new man," in the worst sense of the term, and a symbolic figure at least associated with the devil, if not a minor devil in his own right. Othello calls Iago a "demi-devil" and looks to his feet for the proper signs. Middleton is more blatant. Dampit's name defines him; to make its meaning even more obvious, Middleton gives Audrey, the usurer's serving maid, a little song to sing as she sits by his sickbed:

Let the Usurer cram him, in interest that excell,
There's pits enow to dam him, before he comes to hell.
In Holborne, some; in Fleet-street some;
Where ere he come, there's some there's some some.  
(IV.v.1-4)

Moreover, in the one scene they share, the reclaimed Witgood and the soon-to-sink Dampit are directly compared.

WITT-GOOD. . . .
but my old Harry.

DAMPIT. My sweete Theodorus?  
(I.iv.36-39)

Levin notices the "old Harry" as a possible name for the devil, but, in an overly cautious note (in my opinion) he points out that neither the OED nor Eric Partridge's Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English notes any such usage for the term before the Restoration.27 Levin bases his very tentative case for the diabolic definition of the name on the fact that, in a very short scene, Witgood uses it three times. It seems to me that the immediate pairing
of "old Harry" and "Theodorus" provides more conclusive evidence. In a play in which the country-heiress-cum-courtesan is renamed the Widow Medlar in honor of the fruit which must be rotten before ripe, Theodorus deserves more attention. Etymologically, of course, it means gift of God. More interesting is the fact that this is one of only three places it is used in the play. If we are to grant the playwright any degree of artistry in the design of his work, such a juxtaposition of names deserves consideration.

The symbolic identification of Dampit with the devil is so obvious that one need only quote a few of the epithets used to describe him to establish it. On his sickbed, he is said to "lay like the devill in chains, when he was bound for a thousand yeare." His former disciple, Gulf (the name, like most of those in plays of this sort, is instructive), is, according to Dampit's own drunken description, "great Lucifers little vicar." When old Harry notices a great burning stink about him, Audrey states that "they be the stink- ing nailes of his trampling feete." Levin notes in his article that even the Old One, part of the title of the play, may refer to the devil.\(^2\) If he is correct, Dampit, obviously, has an important function in the play.

Giving symbolic significance to a character otherwise acceptable in more human terms is hardly exceptional, but Middleton's technique is especially interesting. In his best tragedy, The Changeling, De Flores also serves as both
a symbolic force and as an actual character. Symbolically, De Flores serves as the evil center to the play; as a character, he is a man of action. Because he is repulsive on the outside, the rational characters in the play assume that he must be pure on the inside. Only those acting by instinct recognize him for what he is. Dampit is hardly so sophisticated a creation. But when he appears as a man, rather than a devil, he does define the world Witgood must survive in, and, in a curious way, his history makes clear why Witgood finally succeeds and he fails.

Witgood describes Dampit to the Host, his temporary servant, as "a famous infamous Trampler of time; . . . hee . . . is the most notorious, usuring, blasphemous, Atheisticall, Brothell, vomiting rascal, that wee have in these latter times now extant." (I.iv.10-14) Dampit is not ashamed of his methods in this scene; in fact, he glories in them. He remains proud of them in his other two scenes. On his deathbed he rejects a country client (played by Sir Lancelot) because of his purse's state:

SIR LANCELOT. Please your good worship, I am a poore man sir--

DAMPIT. What make you in my Chamber then?

SIR LANCELOT. I would entreat your worship's device in a just and honest cause sir--

DAMPIT. I meddle with no such matters, I refer e'm, to Maister No-mans Office. (IV.v.107-113)
This when he is at death's door, presumably in need of any good deeds that could go with him. Lamprey is right when, viewing Dampit's last stages, he twists the biblical question: "what profits it to be a slave in this world, and a devil ith next?"

What is most telling about Dampit is his total lack of connection with any other human being. We are a long way from the old monolithic systems of order so important to the Elizabethan world, but even here, some type of meaningful confederacy must be maintained. It will be remembered that The Alchemist begins with a terrible row between Face and Subtle which threatens to "o'er throw all." It is only when Doll forcibly reminds them that theirs is a "republic," "a venture tripartite" that they can leave their "factions" and "labor, kindly, in the common work." Dampit is completely alone. Levin notes that

the usurer here is really another embodiment (whose sphere of operations is reduced, of course, to the bourgeois financial world) of that familiar stage-villain of the period, the Machiavellian--the man who has consciously rejected all the personal and social ties of the older order and is out for himself alone. That is why the first Dampit scene emphasizes the fact that he is a wholly self-made man, who has fought his own way up the ladder and regards himself as waging a kind of permanent war with society.30

He mocks his "bosome" Sir Lancelot when he thinks the latter has left the room. The "onely friend that I honor and re-
spect" suddenly becomes a "raskall," the son of a
"Combe-maker"; Dampit has "no neede of his crawling love." His relationship with Gulf is even more unsavory. Indeed, to support Professor Levin's contention that Dampit is a kind of Machiavellian, their falling out seems to be a city version of the break between Barabas and Ithamore in Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*. Gulf threatens to stab his old master on his deathbed, but Dampit is ready for him: "Let him come Gentlemen, I am arm'd, reach my closse stoole hether." (IV.v.176-177)

But it is his relationship, or, rather, lack of one, with Audrey that is most important. When we compare the scenes in which he and Audrey appear to the opening scene between Witgood and his Courtesan, the play's moral values are made manifest. Audrey declares herself "a maide and a virgin" (IV.v.53-54), and we have no reason to disbelieve her. She is unfailingly kind to Dampit, even in his worst moments. Despite his intolerable, drunken insults, she not only cares for him, but even plays little flirtatious games with him:

DAMPIT. Why thou base drudge of infortunity, thou kitchinstuffe drab of Beggery, Roguery and cockscombrie, thou Cavernesed queane of foolery, knavery and baudreaminy, ile tell thee what, I will not give a lowse for thy fortunes.

AUDRY. No, maister Dampit, and there's a Gentleman comes a wooing to me, and he doubts nothing but that you will get mee from him.

DAMPIT. I, if I would either have thee or lie with thee for two thousand pound, would I might bee
damba, why thou base impudent queane of foolery,  
flattery, and cockscombry, are you answered?

AUDRY. Come will you rise and goe to bed, sir?  
(III.iv.45-56)

The most wonderful instance of her kindness comes toward  
the end of the last Dampit scene. As his supposed friends  
leave his bedside, full of the spectacle of the dying blas-  
phemer, full of their own wit at his expense, full of, as  
Levin puts it, "piously sententious condemnations," it is  
Audrey who says, "Pray Gentlemen depart, his howers come  
upon him, sleepe in my bosome, sleepe." (IV.v.183-184)

How does Dampit treat her? Abominably, of course, but  
that is only part of the story. Almost every insult he hurls  
at her contains at least one sexual reference of the most  
degrading kind. Again and again, she is a "queane" or a  
"bawde"; she is "the Spinner of concupiscency"; and, in a  
final burst of filthiness, she is diseased: she is a "cul-  
lisance of scabiosis." When Audrey protests that that is  
hardly the language to be used in front of a maid and a vir-  
gin, Dampit replies, "Hang thy virginity, upon the pole of  
carnality." (IV.v.55) Dampit, obviously, is no gentleman.

Dampit's sexual insults, as opposed to Witgood's com-  
pliments, after he has seen the light and the possibilities,  
provide the other extreme in this play. Dampit is the chief  
exemplar of all that is stunted and sterile. His chief recre-  
tional vice is drinking, not moderately, or even heavily,  
but to the point where it kills him. Because of his habits,
he has "not eaten so much as the bulke of an Egge these 3. dayes" (III.iv.18-19), nor "one pennis of bread these 2. yeares" (III.iv.29). Levin pays a good deal of attention to the accuracy of Middleton's rendering of Dampit as a drunk, but not very much to him as the morally opposite number to Witgood. There is no way to escape the need for tricks in the world of this play; but there are productive and destructive tricks available to the manipulator. Witgood chooses the former, Dampit the latter. Their treatment of "that little pitte" makes clear their respective choices. To Witgood it is indeed the way back to Long-acre; to old Harry it is the damn pit. The ironies are obvious.

Levin notes, quite correctly, that Dampit's fall corresponds almost exactly to Witgood's rise in fortunes. The reason for such reversals in this play has to do, not so much with the niceties of the law--the law is corrupt, and, when convenient, everyone engages in extralegal activities--but rather with the degree of generosity each trickster displays. Audrey is available for Dampit's use, and, in a most cruel way, he uses her. But then he denies her.

DAMPIT. Faith thou hast more cunnycatching devices then all London?

AUDRY. Why Maister Dampit I never deceiv'd you in al my life?

DAMPIT. Why was that? because I never did trust thee. (III.iv.37-40)
Compare that bit of dialogue to Witgood's speech to his Courtesan when the both of them are only half way through their trick and when she is closer to a successful conclusion than he is.

Wench, make up thy owne fortunes now, do thy selfe a good turne once in thy Dayes, hees rich in money, moveables, and lands,—marry him, he's an old doting foole, and that's worth all, marry him, twould bee a great comfort to me to see thee do well ifaith,—marry him, twould ease my conscience well to see thee well bestow'd, I have a care of thee ifaith.

(III.i.113-118)

It is a cruel world that they live in. There is no room for sentimentality. Old Hoard would not be a very attractive mate for a Viola or a Rosalind, but he will do very nicely for the Courtesan, with his wealth, his lands, and his advanced age. And she obtains him, just as Witgood gains his Virgin, through a fruitful joining of forces rather than by Dampit's lonely and sterile methods.

What this play, and the other Jacobean City Comedies, establishes is a new definition of the "natural," and therefore the good, quite different from the version so complacently presented in earlier English plays. Dampit would be pathetically evil and unnatural in whatever work he appeared. The treatment of Witgood is a different matter. The difference between A Trick and its predecessors is that, in his play, Witgood behaves in a "natural" way and is, therefore, at least socially and probably morally superior to his opponents. In an Elizabethan comedy, his method would have
damned him as unnatural. Dampit, made so very black by his creator, enhances Witgood and his schemes—not merely because he is vicious—but because his activities, his language, and his sterility parallel so exactly and so antithetically what Witgood represents.

The opposed characterizations of Witgood and Dampit provide the only set of metaphors which are extended throughout the play. Middleton, in this play, makes those to be admired fertile; those who deserve whatever disaster he chooses to visit upon them are sterile, or, at the very least, impotent. Such identifications are established very early in the play. The pleasant exchange between Witgood and his Courtesan over the begetting of their trick is followed by her witty description of a world in which dried-up, grasping relatives are the first to cheat their own young. It, quite naturally, takes the form of a sexual joke: "Tis right the world, for in these dayes an olde mans love to his kindred, is like his kindnesse to his wife, 'tis alwayes done before hee comes at it." (I.i.91-93) Because another kind of "kindnesse" has been established between them, her comparison is light-hearted enough. But the passage prepares us for a more serious treatment of the subject. What is only emblematic in the static juxtaposition of Witgood and Dampit comes alive in the battle of wits between Witgood and his Courtesan, on the one hand, and Hoard and Lucre on
the other. Middleton's values, or lack of them, are made clear in so much more dramatic a confrontation.
NOTES

CHAPTER ONE

1 See the chronology in Gibbons, pp. 218-221.

2 For a brief history of, and a full bibliography on the treatment of the "prodigal" in Renaissance drama, see John Doebler, "Beaumont's The Knight of the Burning Pestle and the Prodigal Son Plays," SEL, 5 (Spring, 1965), 333-344.

3 As the titles and settings make clear, the favorite neighborhoods were either, like Cheapside, the commercial districts of London proper or the notorious suburbs. Preferred seasons were either term times, when country dwellers came to the city while the courts were in session, or special times of public celebration, such as the last days of August, when the Bartholomew Fair was in progress. The most important annual catastrophe was the visitation of the plague. For the purposes of the dramatists writing this type of play 1603 was the annus mirabilis. Wilson estimates that between one third and one fourth of London's population was destroyed in that year's disaster. During plague seasons most of those in authority fled the city, leaving rogues like Face and Subtle a free hand. See especially John Stow, The Survey of London, intro. by H. B. Wheatley, rev. ed. (1956; rpt. London: Everymans-Dent, 1965). This edition is a corrected version of Stow's 1603 text. See also Henry Morley, Memoirs of Bartholomew Fair, new ed. (London: Chatto and Windus, 1880); and Wilson, The Plague in Shakespeare's London.

4 See Gibbons, pp. 15-31.

5 Thomas Middleton, A Trick to Catch the Old One, ed. Charles Barber (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1968), I.i.1-26. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are from this edition.

6 Anatomy of Criticism, p. 163.

7 Frye, p. 167.


For an interesting selection of such writings, see A. V. Judges, ed., The Elizabethan Underworld (London, 1930).


See especially his Your Five Gallants and The Roaring Girl, the latter written in collaboration with Thomas Dekker.

Barber, p. 3.

For an analysis of Greene's methods with his audience, see Gibbons, pp. 212-14.

Greene's sincerity has sometimes been doubted because of his ability to appeal to quite contradictory audiences. Thus, he wrote not only romances and cony-catching pamphlets, but also confessions with such titles as Greene's Mourning Garment (1590), Greene's Farewell to Folly (1591), Greene's Groatworth of Wit Bought with a Million of Repentance (1592), and The Repentance of Robert Greene (1592). See J. C. Jordan, Robert Greene (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1915).

A Trick to Catch the Old One was first published in 1608 after it had been successfully acted by the Children of Paul's and the Children of the Blackfriars. Since the Children of Paul's were no longer in existence by the middle of 1606 (see E. K. Chambers, The Elizabethan Stage (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923), II, 19-23] the play was probably written in 1603 or 1606. Other Middleton City Comedies were written by at least that date and probably before. See Richard Hindry Barker, Thomas Middleton (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1958), pp. 158-77.

The classic example is Duke Frederick's conversion from his murderous intent to a monastic life in Shakespeare's As You Like It. Any number of other examples could be given.

Frye, p. 166. According to W. K. Wimsatt in a note to his introduction to The Idea of Comedy (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969), p. 11, "the Tractatus Coislinianus, as it was named after a French noblemen who had owned it, survives in a manuscript of the tenth century A.D., and is attributed to the first century B.C." He suggests the reader "see J. A. Cramer, Anecdotar Graeca (Oxford, 1839), I, 403-6" and "Lane Cooper, An Aristotelian Theory of Comedy (New York, 1922), p. 10."
Frye, p. 166.

The idea of a golden age lost, but to be regained in an even more magnificent form, is common to most seasonal myths and to most religions, especially Christianity. Milton's "Lycidas" offers an almost perfect representation of the archetype. During the course of poem's progression, Lycidas is remembered as a shepherd especially favored and especially happy in a pastoral setting; he is mourned in his present state, a corpse whose "bones are hurl'd" somewhere beneath the sea; and he is celebrated in the poet's final vision of him rising like "the daystar" to join "all the Saints above," a pastoral company superior even to the best of the natural creatures who danced to his music while he was still mortal. Marxism, with its hope for the withering away of all government after the revolution has been completed, is an obvious political equivalent. See William Empson, Some Versions of Pastoral (London: Chatto and Windus, 1935), especially his first chapter, "Proletarian Literature."

Regaining or procuring an estate in the country is a common reward in Middleton's comedies and in some of Jonson's. Lovewit in The Alchemist and Winwife in Bartholomew Fair gain peace in the country by marrying, respectively, Dame Pliant and Grace Wellborn. But they earned, or fell into, such holdings in the city, and it is not likely that they would retire permanently to their rural retreats.

See Drama & Society in the Age of Jonson, pp. 88-95.

Jonson's Volpone actually turns the metaphor into a full-blown allegory, but there is no reason to assume any one dramatist influenced another since the notion of the crafty fox goes back at least to Aesop.


See, as an example, the remarkable exchange between the witch and her son in Middleton's The Witch:

Firestone. . . . Mother, I pray, give me leave to ramble abroad tonight with the Nightmare, for I have a great mind to overlay a fat parson's daughter.

Hecate. And who shall lie with me, then?

Firestone. The great cat
For one night, mother; 'tis but a night:
Make shift with him for once.
Hecate. You're a kind son!
But 'tis the nature of you all, I see that;
You had rather hunt after strange women still
Than lie with your own mothers.  (I.ii.90-98)

26 "The Dampit Scenes in A Trick to Catch the Old One," MLQ, 25 (June 1964), 140-152. A slightly revised version of this essay appears in Richard Levin, The Multiple Plot in English Renaissance Drama (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 127-137. I have used the MLQ version because it better serves my purposes. I had reached many of the same conclusions Levin presents before his original essay was published.

27 See note 12 in Levin, p. 150. The name Theodorus also turns up in Witgood's signature to a note to his beloved assuring her of his faithfulness:

Deerer then sight, what the world reports of me yet beleev not, rumour will alter shortly, be thou constant, I am still the same that I was in love, and I hope to be the same in fortunes.

Theodorus Witt-good (III.ii.17-20)

and at the end of the play in the mouth of Hoard after Witgood's tricks have brought about the desired unions and (perhaps) taught the old ones the folly of their anger:

Curst be all Malice, blacke are the fruiotes of spite, And poyson first their owners . . .

Ah Wit-good, ah Theodorus.  (V.ii.145-49)

28 Levin, p. 150.


30 Levin, p. 145.

31 Levin, p. 143.
CHAPTER TWO

MORALITY IN A TRICK TO CATCH THE OLD ONE

George Peele's Madge, the old wife in The Old Wives' Tale established herself as a maker of comedies by telling her bumptious listeners to "hear my tale, or kiss my tail."\(^1\) Shakespeare's Sir Toby Belch established himself as an ideal comic character, a kind of idiot savante of the genre, when he attacked Malvolio, that arch-precisionist: "Dost thou think, because thou are virtuous, / there shall be no more cakes and ale?"\(^2\) But that is only part of what comedy is all about.

Another dimension is added when we look at those tragedies which are essentially failed comedies. Antigone and Romeo and Juliet are obvious examples. Othello is less obvious, and, perhaps for that reason, a better model. Othello begins in the dark of night with a clandestine elopement, an enraged father, a troubled state, a stormy sea, and Iago's obscenities: "Even now, now, very now, an old black ram/ Is tupping your white ewe."\(^3\) From so potentially tragic a beginning the play moves to a comic resolution in II.iii., peace seemingly restored everywhere with the consummation of Othello's marriage. Then the tragedy begins. Beneath Desdemona's bridal chamber Iago successfully promotes a saturnalian orgy, comedy out of control, and the lower hall destroys the fertile "fruits" and "profits" Othello meant to gain in the upper room.
The most extreme examples of comic impulses gone wrong are to be found in the plays of Euripides. What happens in *Hippolytus* is common knowledge. A less widely read and acted play, *The Bacchae*, because of the stature and inclinations of its protagonist, is even more instructive. Pentheus, king of Thebes, righteous unto himself, attempts to eradicate from his realm the worshippers of Dionysus, and, with them, all of their obscene rituals. But, just as Aphrodite proves to be too strong for Phaedra and Hippolytus, so Dionysus and all that he stands for proves to be too strong for Pentheus. Disguised as a mere priest in his own order, he meets the king and the audience soon understands that, despite himself, Pentheus is fascinated by that which he condemns. He would like to see, at the very least, the disgusting sexual practices that are part of the Bacchic rites. The god leads him, disguised as a reveler, through the streets of his own city. As only gods and small children can, Dionysus makes him an emperor without clothes for all his people to see. Then, when they reach Mount Cithæron, the site of the orgies, he is literally torn apart by the devotees, his own mother chief among them. Such is the fate of supremely moral men when they give in, as comedy says they must, and scratch whatever itches.\(^4\)

That is the tragic view of what a denial of comic impulses leads to. Interesting as it is, it is no more sufficient to explain comedies than are the bon mots quoted
in the first paragraph. For, actual stage comedies present those same drives under control. To understand what that means, comedies themselves must be examined.

I

Notions of what is moral, as Montaigne discovered, and as modern anthropologists have confirmed, are not to be automatically accepted as God-given truths brought by every human being from the womb. Comedy, of all the genres, suffers most from this failure on God's part, or, at least the critics'. Morality, the most magnificent conception we have been blessed with, and the unkindest tool we have been given to cut with, has not been used very well, very often, in the description of comedies. Professional critics have often been as foolish in their judgments as professional moralists.

Ibsen's Hedda Gabler provides the cruelest parody I have ever read of the relationship between the creative artist and his or her aesthetic judge. Hedda gives Lövborg a single pistol to be used to kill himself and a simple request: "But let it be--beautiful, Ejlert Lövborg! Promise me that!" And as soon as he has left on his mission of self-destruction, she burns the manuscript he and Thea labored over; even her language is instructive: "Your child, Thea--your child and Ejlert Lövborg's. Darling little Thea, with the curly golden hair. I'm burning your
child, Thea. I'm burning it--burning it--." Lövborg, sloppy creator that he is, bungles the job; in search of his "child" he accidentally shoots himself through the bowels in a whore's boudoir. The horror Hedda feels in the face of such an aesthetic betrayal, and the distaste she feels for the smarmy Judge Brack who now has power over her, brings her to her own suicide. In a room redolent of her father, the General, after playing wild dance music (the same tarantella Nora danced to for Torvald in A Doll's House, perhaps?), she shoots herself through the temple with the mate to the pistol she gave Lövborg. She manages to die immediately and on a sofa, no doubt ideally composed. Con-
summatum est! When you want something done right, you have to do it yourself.⁵

That is not to say that critics are, by the very nature of their profession, destructive; nor is it to say that they have a natural animus towards creative forms that celebrate chicanery, lubricity, and, ultimately, fertility. But it is true that at least since Aristotle comedies have not been treated with the same degree of seriousness as those forms which end in death for their major characters, as most tragedies do, or with the probability of the destruction of an entire society, as some of the epics do. That is curious, and worth further examination. Furthermore, it suggests that we need a different set of terms to deal with comedies than those used to describe other art forms.
Northrop Frye was not being original when he called comic values social rather than moral. Such a distinction would not have been foreign to Plato or Aristotle, no matter how much they might have disagreed on the value of different kinds of poets and their works, or even on the value of poets per se. Bergson and Meredith, in their own ways, espoused similar notions. Albert Cook, in *The Dark Voyage and the Golden Mean*, is positively at home with it. What is most distressing about such a distinction is not its inaccuracy, for it is accurate enough, but rather the connotations the words "moral" and "social" have come to have, and maybe always had, except in the minds of the most sophisticated and tolerant of thinkers. When Matthew Arnold made "high seriousness" one of the chief virtues of great art, he was not being merely Victorian: he was writing in the great tradition of Western criticism. To be a moral man is to be concerned with grave truths; to be a social man is to be devoted to surfaces, to style rather than substance. That is not exactly what Frye meant by such terms, but, unfortunately, such connotations have been impossible for most critics to avoid.

As a result, the criticism of comedy has usually been relegated to one of two schools, neither of them as helpful as they could be in showing us whatever ethical significance might be intrinsic to the genre. The first school simply ignores the problem by accepting the popular
conception of "social" as I have described it. Its members admire stage comedies for their surface brilliance, their polish, their pace, their wit--and ignore any more serious concern. These might be called the anti-sugar-coated-pill theorists. The other school is pro-sugar-coated-pill. They find a great deal of high seriousness despite, rather than because of, comic form.

This second school offers two possible approaches: though both employ external examples to confirm their readings, the one treats the whole play, the other, several of its parts. The first discovers moral significance in certain plays through comparison with other obviously moral "concerns," "problems," "themes," "styles," or "structures" historically concurrent with the play in question. Among Jonson scholars, as an example, the two most brilliant practitioners using this method are L. C. Knights and Jonas Barish: the former sets Jonson's plays against seventeenth-century economic conditions, the latter against the varieties of seventeenth-century prose styles.\(^{11}\) The other branch appreciates a given play in bits and pieces, as those bits and pieces conform to or suggest other genres, which, by definition, are more serious, or to systems of thought which are, once again by definition, morally inclined. A good example of such an approach--even its title is exact--is Helena Watts Baum's *The Satiric and Didactic in Ben Jonson's Comedy*.\(^{12}\)
Ms. Baum's approach is the more common one, and, when practiced by someone as skillful as herself, it can yield excellent results. But it is a very dangerous approach for the unwary. The temptation simply to call anything that does not fit preconceived notions satiric rather than Frye's social is a very strong one. There is a kind of moral imperative involved; if such ebullient celebrations of London low life as The Alchemist and Bartholomew Fair cannot be proven to be satires throughout, so moral a man as Jonson has been recognized to be by his recent admirers will be diminished—and so will his admirers. A recent study of Jonson's plays, set, this time, against his copybook, Timber, or Discoveries, offers one of the more ingenious explanations for the few disparities which cannot be set aside: "The artist's duty, his function, was, for Jonson, to combat evil; but he perceived the possibility that the task was hopeless." 13 Brilliant as most of the studies I have mentioned are, too many apologies or too much insistence that everything disagreeable, aesthetically or morally, must have been a bit of satire is not very convincing. New descriptive terms will not change the plays themselves, but they will make it easier for serious-minded critics to champion them in the face of their own reservations.

Before we can expropriate more highly regarded terms to describe comic values, it is necessary to try to understand why, in the first place, "moral" is considered
superior to "social," and why tragedies (moral works) have been considered by almost everyone superior to comedies (social works). Whether or not tragedies and comedies owe their origins to different phases of the ritualized season myths, they do present strikingly different, and yet complementary versions of what is important in living and dying. Theorists who have attempted to explain the differences between the Romantic poets and their Neo-classical predecessors are fond of talking about the distinctions between literature as process and literature as product. Comedies and tragedies can also be discussed in those terms, and the same kinds of paradoxes become immediately apparent. At least from the audience's point of view, a great tragedy, while it is being acted out, is an action in process, Aristotle's "plot," whether it is a progress or a processional; we are fascinated by the tragic protagonist's immediate responses to his fate, whether deserved or not. But when the play is finished, it is a finished product, an artifact in a sense comedies never are. Comedies, on the other hand, seem all product at first glance, glittery and contrived or romantically indistinct. But comedies are actually about a part of a continuing process; they do not end in the sense that tragedies do with the final curtain. "They lived happily ever after" means that they do continue to have some kind of half-life in the minds of their viewers in a way that tragic protagonists never do, and, whether "happily"
or not, mere living connotes a continuing process which is at least a little unpredictable.

Since L. C. Knights' famous essay, "How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?," few scholars have dared defend the old Romantic scholars so interested in the personal lives of characters outside their vehicles where, obviously, they have no existence.\textsuperscript{14} Fortunate as Knights' essay proved to be, it created at least one artificial barrier we could have done without. There is obviously some connection between life and art, between characters and people. Furthermore, there is obviously some connection between the experiences comedies and tragedies depict and the experiences themselves. At least one of their functions is to offer renditions of the various arts of living and dying. In my opinion, comedy is less regarded by most theoreticians because life is. Death is so wonderfully final and, therefore, aesthetically and morally manageable. It allows a proper assessment, a summing up, the creation of a monument of the right size and shape. Life, except possibly for those saints and martyrs who spend all of it preparing to leave it, is messy and as startling as the comic plots which mirror it. Have not many moralists told us that the great Greek and Elizabethan tragedies demonstrate the value of life and the nobility of man? The implication seems to be that life is proven most valuable in the leaving of it, and man most noble when his dust has come to rest in the
stopping of a bunghole. High seriousness is to be found, not in love-making and child-begetting, but in the lessons to be learned at the foot of the death-bed. Hamlet, dying, prevents his friend, Horatio, from killing himself with a moral request: "Absent thee from felicity awhile,/ And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,/ To tell my story."15

Artists and critics are necessary to each other, even complementary; but that is not to say that their habits of mind are similar. It is interesting to note how few people have been both great critics and great artists, at least at the same time, and, when such miraculous creatures do appear, it is even more interesting to note how their theories and practices complement or contradict each other. The thinkers of the Italian Renaissance wrote dramatic poetry, but they did not create a body of literature equal to their critical refinements. Sir Philip Sidney, in his The Defense of Poesie, attacks the very qualities in contemporary plays that made them more highly regarded in the years since than his own Arcadia. Jonson's best plays belong with his lusty table talk recorded by Drummond of Hawthornden, his worst with the deadly critical platitudes in the Discoveries. Nahum Tate's version of King Lear is not even to be compared with Shakespeare's, while Lewis Theobald's Shakespeare Restored is much superior to Pope's edition, despite the fun the latter had with the former in The
Dunciad. Swinburne and Arnold did not write great critical studies or issue manifestoes until they were through with poetry. And in our own century W. B. Yeats, certainly one of the finest poets in the language, proves a most uncertain guide in his introduction to and selections for his version of The Oxford Book of Modern Verse.¹⁶

Dryden, Coleridge, and T. S. Eliot were probably the finest poets in English who managed to be major critics at the same time. While I do not wish to defend too extreme a position, it does seem to me that these three offer us literary criticism from the point of view of the poet rather than the formal critic. Even in their criticism, they are all very much poetic craftsmen; what the poet says is important, but how he came to say it and how well he says it is much more important. All three are capable of defining in very large terms the nature of the creative process and then leaping very quickly to an appreciation of the subtlest touch a given artist has been able to, or should have been able to manage.

Thus, in An Essay of Dramatic Poesy, Neander, usually identified as Dryden himself,¹⁷ is less interested in the "Ancients" and the "Rules" than he is in the nature of the dramatic poet's "Genius." On the other hand, in "A Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire," it is technique he admires: "yet there is still a vast difference betwixt the slovenly butchering of a man, and the
fineness of a stroke that separates the head from the body, and leaves it standing in its place."\textsuperscript{18}

In his \textit{Biographia Literaria}, Coleridge gives us not only his own definition of poetic genius, but also all we need to know, and perhaps even care to know, about the "Imagination" and the "Fancy."\textsuperscript{19} When his criticism becomes more specific, it is usually directed at that which he admires, and is, accordingly, generous and enthusiastic. His well-known passage on \textit{Othello}, to be quoted in a different context later in this chapter, may serve as a representative example.

Eliot, probably because he is closest to us in time and in terminology, serves best as an example of the poet turned critic. Since the publication of \textit{The Sacred Wood} in 1920 he has written a great deal of literary criticism and he has been the inspiriter of much more. In his general works he speaks of the creation of poetry as an almost involuntary process. The true poet does not set out to create a given work; instead he begins with a rhythm or a kind of movement which may bring to birth something demanding words to clothe it. "When you have the words for it, the 'thing' for which the words had to be found has disappeared, replaced by a poem."\textsuperscript{20} Unintelligible as such a definition might be to those of us who have never been touched by heavenly fire or filled with a divine afflatus, Eliot's description is not very different from those given by other creators
who actually created a decent work of art. If the Old Possum is grinning at us, he is in good company; most of the other important poets who bothered to write about their craft smiled in the same way.

In his specific criticism Eliot attacks or admires writers, but almost never on the basis of their recorded or reported moral stance. Instead, he celebrates all that he considers poetically superior, however morally reprehensible its creator might seem to have been, and he disparages morally firm writers whose poetry displeases him. Certainly Dryden's beliefs, both religious and political, were close to Eliot's own; yet Eliot attacks him as a poet--admittedly not in terms as virulent as those he applied to Milton in his first essay on that worthy--but he does attack him because he, like the other writers of his age, suffered from that dread disease, the disassociation of sensibility. On the other hand, the "inscrutable, solitary, unadmired" Middleton wrote a "tragedy which more than any play except those of Shakespeare has a profound and permanent moral value and horror; and one comedy which more than any Elizabethan comedy realizes a free and noble womanhood." Therefore, Eliot, a man of strongly held and clearly enunciated political, religious, and esthetic principles, admires him.

Of all the Elizabethan dramatists Middleton seems the most impersonal, the most indifferent to personal fame or perpetuity, the readiest, except
Rowley, to accept collaboration. Also he is the most various. His greatest tragedies and his greatest comedies are as if written by two different men. Yet...

The "Yet" is important in the essay. It reappears in the summary paragraph quoted above.

Yet there seems no doubt that Middleton was both a great comic writer and a great tragic writer. ... He remains merely a name, a voice, the author of certain plays, which are all of them great plays. He has no point of view, is neither resigned, nor disillusioned, nor romantic, he has no message. He is merely the name which associates six or seven great plays.23

Eliot was a remarkably truthful poet-critic; in his essay, "The Music of Poetry," he tells us that

the critical writings of poets ... owe a great deal of their interest to the fact that the poet, at the back of his mind, if not as his ostensible purpose, is always trying to defend the kind of poetry he is writing, or to formulate the kind that he wants to write.24

Thus Middleton, though less famous, and perhaps less congenial, fares better in Eliot's criticism than did Dryden or Milton.

Formal critics use a different set of standards. Matthew Arnold the poet created the brilliant and gloomy "Empedocles on Etna"; Arnold, the older, perhaps wiser, and certainly more socially conscious critic disowned it and even tried to banish it from his canon.25 Algernon Charles Swinburne, as a talented and dissolute young poet,26 created Keatsian and sometimes even murderous gardens as settings for his more extreme poetic fantasies. Half in love
with easeful death, but still willing to bedaub, if not
gild the lily, he created such wonderfully unhealthy poems
as "The Garden of Proserpine," "A Forsaken Garden," and his
fine elegy for Baudelaire, "Ave Atque Vale." When he was
reclaimed or ruined, depending upon one's point of view, by
Watts-Dunton and country air, he became a scholar-critic
and a very good one. The figurative language he used
changed to conform to his new occupation. Instead of cele-
brating the Italianate dramatists of the English Renaissance,
who had, one presumes, more in common with Baudelaire than
with Tennyson or Browning, Swinburne the poet's natural ene-
mies, he preferred bluff, hearty, English Henry Porter, a
not very well preserved Elizabethan dramatist. Porter was,
in Swinburne's metaphorical exuberance, a small, tenacious
man-o'-war; the more fashionable dramatists were Spanish
galleons, encrusted with all sorts of unnecessary baroque
ornamentation. Since everyone knows what happen'd in '88
when the small English ships met the great Spanish ones,
his choice of similes and metaphors make his criticism at
least a message, and perhaps even a lesson. Furthermore,
his secret poetic gardens

Out of the mystic and the mournful garden
Where all day through thine hands in barren braid
Wove the sick flowers of secrecy and shade,
Green buds of sorrow and sin, and remnants gray,
Sweet-smelling, pale with poison, sanguine-hearted.
Passions that sprang from sleep and thoughts that
started . . . 27
gave way in his criticism, in accordance with his own newly stated preferences, to the great untended, and very natural forest, the simile he chose to describe the achievements of the best English dramatists of the Renaissance. Rough though the terrain might be, the height of the treetops justified any unpleasant undergrowth the fastidious reader might have to pick his way through.

Great and even good writers are, for some miraculous reason, able to write well. Despite all the theories which have been offered to explain such an aberrant gift or torment, we are no closer to understanding what it is or where it came from than the old mythmakers were when they brooded over Philoctetes' wound and bow. Writers of comedies have never been accorded the same respect granted to even minor writers specializing in "important" (meaning deadly or dreadful) subjects. They are, by the very nature of their profession, considered moral lightweights. If life for most intelligent people is at least at times a joke, the critics, who for the most part are intelligent people, have refused to admit it. Critics, unlike artists, are arbiters working against a standard which dictates what should be rather than what is. Therefore, we need new terms. We need to deal, as comic writers do, in the realm of the practical, in what modern theoreticians call situation ethics.
In 1910 Marjorie Barstow, as a sophomore at Cornell, wrote an essay, "Oedipus Rex As The Ideal Tragic Hero of Aristotle," in which she attempted to prove Oedipus responsible for his fate because he had failed to live according to the "golden mean" Aristotle had posited as an ideal in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. As Cedric Whitman demonstrated some forty years later, the *Ethics* cannot be used to interpret the *Poetics*. But that is because the *Poetics* deals with Greek tragedies in which *arete*—Whitman translates this to mean "superior virtue"—is a positive value, despite the misery it may cause those who possess it. The *Ethics*, on the other hand, is a work on politics, the science or the art of which demands flexibility and compromise. It is an ideal text to be applied to the understanding of comedies in which rigidity and a penchant for legalistic nonsense are the chief sins. While it is to be deplored that Aristotle's rumored work on comedies has never been discovered, the *Ethics* does not serve as a bad substitute. And the word ethics itself has a nice ring to it, superior to social, and not much, if any, below moral.

II

The notion of what constitutes an ethical ideal in Jacobean City Comedies, and, particularly those by Middleton, deserves further consideration. *A Trick to Catch the Old One*, again, offers the best examples. With the exception
of Levin's article on the Dampit scenes, this play has only been appreciated either for its "realistic" presentation of Jacobean city life or for the ingenuity of its plot.\textsuperscript{32} No one, it seems, has been willing to be an advocate for it as one of the models of a new kind of urban morality. In fact, the opposite may be taken as the rule. Harbage's \textit{Shakespeare and the Rival Traditions} serves as nicely as any other book as an example of the treatment \textit{A Trick} has usually received. Indeed, according to Harbage, characters like Witgood are inferior, ethically, to a Master Frankford, who manages to kill his wife kindly. According to him, \textit{A Trick} and plays like it are either immoral or amoral, meant as a sop to the presently extravagant, but financially precariously balanced fops who made up the audiences at the private or "coterie" theaters. (No one, not even Professor Harbage, has bothered to explain how this class of people managed to escape the monolithic moral conditioning so often granted, like a birthright, to every other Elizabethan.) Everyone in the play is a villain to a greater or lesser degree, utterly without redeeming social merit. Harbage, one of the finest and kindest of critics now writing on Elizabethan plays, is not being presumptuous when he prefers Heywood to Middleton and the other so-called "coterie" dramatists; his assessments follow logically from his assumptions, and, in fact, from the general tenets which constitute the gospel of twentieth-century Renaissance
scholarship. The assumptions themselves are suspect; Jacobean City Comedies cannot receive a fair hearing until they have been questioned.

The creation of the modern orthodoxy began in 1936 with the publication of two seminal works, Hardin Craig's *The Enchanted Glass* and Arthur O. Lovejoy's *The Great Chain of Being.* Despite the accuracy of the general picture they offer us, the doctrinaire quality of the portraits suggests at least some hardening of the critical methods. Again and again, we are told the Elizabethans could not have thought this, would never have dreamed of that, and that the opinion offered by the student in the back row is simply out of the question. What began as a necessary corrective to the Romantic cults of personality has become as killingly restrictive as the Romantic versions were sometimes fanciful.

Is it really true, as E. M. W. Tillyard tells us, that it was impossible to be an agnostic, or simply to lose interest in spiritual matters, during this period? His few sentences on the subject are informative:

We should never let ourselves forget that the orthodox scheme of salvation was pervasive in the Elizabethan age. You could revolt against it but you could not ignore it. Atheism not agnosticism was the rule. It was far easier to be very wicked and think yourself so than to be a little wicked without a sense of sin. This is a strikingly original notion of atheism. It might satisfactorily describe those addicted to some new variation
of Manicheanism, but it would hardly pertain to actual atheists who would, one presumes, either be indifferent to the spreading of their lack of belief, or, at the very least, be cautious. Moreover, according to the documents available to us, such an opinion is not even accurate. The most famous "atheists and blasphemers" of the age, Raleigh and Marlowe, are not so easily described. Probably at worst they were agnostics, at best (using Tillyard's value system) the Renaissance equivalents of modern Unitarians. As all literary historians must, Tillyard has selected some documents and works as authentic guides to the pervasive moral and theological attitudes of the time; he has rejected others. Such an approach is not only admirable, but necessary if any kind of order is to be achieved. But how, then, can Marlowe's Doctor Faustus, his The Jew of Malta, and his blasphemous opinions, as set down by Richard Baines, a professional informer, be reconciled? They cannot. Such steadfastness in the description of a people or an age could be used to prove that Jesus and Socrates died peacefully in their beds of old age and that Donatello's David could not have been created by him fifty or more years before other artists looked at the human body in such a way.

The chief impediment historical scholars have placed in the way of properly evaluating Jacobean City Comedies comes from their presentation of Machiavellianism and what it meant to English audiences. Though Hardin Craig
demonstrated that some could have been familiar with the real article, everyone the least bit interested by now knows that the Elizabethans did not take their Machiavelli straight. What is less clear is to what degree they were willing to accept, even practice methods like those he advocated. One gathers from the sometimes hysterical tone of the anti-Machiavellians that his cynically pragmatic view of men and their ways was considered a very real threat. Why should that be, if, indeed, the average Englishman of the Renaissance was as Tillyard describes him? Obviously, the attractiveness of so-called Machiavellian ideas had less to do with the steely genius of their progenitor than with their evident correspondence to what really occurred in real life. Rather than being a devil, Machiavelli was a shrewd observer.

Thinkers and commentators do not live in vacuums. Machiavelli, as well as Innocent Gentillet, had more immediate reasons for writing what he did than the conditioning of foreign populations many years later. But his ideas did retain their force (and continue to do so), even though often misinterpreted and placed in contexts quite different from the one he planned them for. Ideas that last and are exportable have more to do with the human condition than with any immediate political or ethical consideration. The mistake made by so many historians of the Elizabethan-Jacobean period is to be traced to their willingness to
accept as credible the extreme and wholesale attacks on all that smacked of Machiavelli and his hated "system." While such an approach may help us to understand the politic Claudius and the murderous Barabas, it is too blunt an instrument to be applied to the comedies of the period.

We are being asked to accept an abstraction. Machiavelli's ideas have been described as patriotic, as utilitarian, and as demonic. He has been called the best political scientist of his age, its chief realist, and the greatest boogeyman of all time. Perhaps everything said of him is true; but so gargantuan a figure is hardly in keeping with the experiences of ordinary Elizabethan theater-goers or playwrights. It is a mistake to assume that characters in plays other than such tragic farces as Marlowe's The Jew of Malta, or histories like Richard III, or tragedies like Othello, were meant to serve as such huge representations. Even Kyd's Lorenzo, an authentic Machiavel, cannot live up to so grand a conception.

The stage Machiavel, as he has been recreated by modern scholars, can be separated into his human and diabolic parts. In his most benign human form he is willing to employ questionable, or, on some occasions, even wicked means to achieve an end desirable to himself. This is policy. The most successful politicians are skillful in procuring "tools" to do their business, though few mind getting their own hands dirty. In Elizabethan tragedies such behavior
usually leads the most important evil character into a state of isolation which becomes more extreme as his schemes become more and more abhorrent. This is the human aspect of the Machiavel. The demonic becomes apparent when we search for his motives for behaving in such a way and cannot find them, or, at the very least, cannot find strong enough ones to justify his methods. Thus Coleridge in his deservedly famous description of Iago speaks of his "motiveless malignity"; from here it is an easy leap to the assumption that the Machiavel derives a fiendish pleasure from his damnable acts, and Coleridge makes it:

the last speech, Iago's soliloquy ["Go to, farewell, put money enough in your purse; / Thus do I ever make my fool my purse." (I.iii.377-78)], shows the motive-hunting of motiveless malignity—how awful! In itself fiendish; while yet he was allowed to bear the divine image, it is too fiendish for his own steady view. He is a being next to devil, only not quite devil.42

Such a creature, like Milton's Satan, has made evil his good; he is beyond the pale of even the understanding of other human beings. That is an accurate reconstruction of your compleat Machiavel. The difficulties arise, at least for interpretations of comedies, when the whole is substituted for one or more of the parts.

In A Trick everyone, including Witgood, the Courtesan, and even Joyce, Witgood's "virgin," is a Machiavellian of a sort. The same is true of most of the characters in all the other Jacobean City Comedies. The confusion over
Middleton's morality, immorality, or amorality is the result of failing to recognize the distinctions between characters as one of degree rather than kind. Dampit, though a rather pathetic one, is a complete Machiavel while Witgood uses shady means to achieve excellent ends for himself and his cohorts without doing serious damage to his opponents. In between those two are the Hoards, the Lucrees, and the prodigal's creditors. They are extreme Machiavels, but not complete ones; they are still human rather than fiendish. The imagery associated with them, and in contrast to the imagery Witgood employs, makes their position clear and defines the ethical structure of the play.

III

The Courtesan's joke, quoted at the end of the last chapter, becomes more ominous and the contrast between the young and the old more marked towards the end of the first scene of *A Trick to Catch the Old One*. Here we have a description of the war between Hoard and Lucre in the words of Hoard's brother, hardly a young wastrel. Elaborating on the Courtesan's observation and giving us a neat definition of the natural in this brave new world of the city, he says that "tis as naturall for old folkes to fall out, as for yong to fall in." (I.i.126-127) Why did these two old ones, so alike, fall out of love?
Faith about a purchase, fetching over a yong heire; Maister Hoord my brother having wasted much time in beating the bargayne, what did me old Lucre, but as his conscience mov'd him, knowing the poore Gentleman, stept in betweene e'm and couzned him himselfe. (I.i.114-120)

Does such warfare gratify them? Indeed, it does:


Revelatory as these descriptions are, they are only one step up from the information already provided us by Witgood and the Courtesan. It remains for the two combatants to meet face to face to reveal the true state of affairs in the City they, and those like them, dominate.

"Anger is the wind" which troubles these reverend city fathers. "Three Summers" have failed to heal their breach; in fact, the mere sight of Lucre "drops scalding Lead instead of Balsum" into Hoard's "wound." Lucre, who, in his own words, only wishes to "passe in the state of quietnesse" befitting his age and dignity, is willing to "referre the cause to honest evenminded Gentlemen, or require the meere indifferences of the Lawe, to decide this matter." (I.iii.1-11) The "matter" is as Hoard's brother described it: a quarrel over the proper gulling of a young heir. Hoard is properly aggrieved.
HOORD. Was it the part of a friend: no, rather of a Jew, marke what I say, when I had beaten the bush to the last bird, or as I may terme it, the price to a pound, then like a cunning Usurer to come in the evening of the bargaine, and gleane all my hopes in a minute, to enter as it were at the backe-doore of the purchase, for thou nere camst the right way by it. (I.iii.16-21)

His self-righteousness and his rancor, like his opponent's, know no bounds:

HOORD. What's all to thee? nothing, nothing; such is the gulfe of thy desire, and the Wolfe of thy conscience, but be assured old Pecunious Lucre, if ever fortune so blesse me, that I may be at leisure to vexe thee, or any meanes so favour me, that I may have oportunitie to mad thee, I will pursue it with that flame of hate, that spirit of malice, unrepressed wrath, that I will blast thy comforts.

LUCRE. Ha, ha, ha!

LAMPREY. Nay Maister Hoord you're a wise Gentleman.

HOORD. I will so crosse thee--

LUCRE. And I thee.

HOORD. So without mercy fret thee.

LUCRE. So monstrously oppose thee?

HOORD. Doost scoffe at my just anger? oh that I had as much power as usury ha's over thee.

LUCRE. Then thou wouldst have as much power as the devill ha's over thee.

HOORD. Toade!

LUCRE. Aspick.

HOORD. Serpent.

LUCRE. Viper. 43 (I.iii.33-53)

With such gravity are the meetings of the City's great conducted.
When Witgood needs to find the means to put his fertile scheme to work, he uses an image which, had it appeared in a tragedy, would have struck horror in the minds of his audience. To get horses and a man, he will go to a "madde Host," never yet bawd to the Courtesan, and "powre the sweet circumstance into his eare." Here we have all the associations Shakespeare used so brilliantly in Hamlet. It is the Devil pouring his tantalizing words into the ear of Eve which caused our fall from Paradise. It is the serpent gliding stealthily through the garden to drop his poison in the ear of the unsuspecting man. But here it will have an opposite effect: it "shall have the gift to turne all the waxe to hunny." (I.i.97098) It will lead to the promised land.

In contrast, "three Summers," seasons of fertility, have failed to bring peace between Hoard and Lucre. Instead, the mere awareness of the other's existence "drops scalding Lead" into the lesion, rather than "Balsum." The poisonous core each discovers in the other grows with their rhetoric. "Toade!" "Aspick." "Serpent." "Viper." For them summer is not the season of milk and honey; it is a season of desolation, of harsh winds and "plaguy times"; it is the proper season, not for lovers, but for pirates. Hoard hates Lucre because, "in a minute" he was able to "gleane" all his hopes in the cheating of a young heir. He has been willing to ruin his own nephew, to "lap his lands into bonds."
Instead of being potentially productive bodies, like Witgood, Joyce, and the Courtesan, they are "Two old tough spirits, they seldom meete but fight, or quarrel/ when tis calmest;/ I thinke their anger bee the very fire/ That keepses their age alive." "Anger is the winde" which troubles them. If ever Hoard is blessed by fortune (a wonderful phrase under the circumstances), he will use his leisure to "vexe" Lucre, to "mad" him: "I will pursue it with that flame of/ hate, that spirit of malice, unrepressed wrath, that I will blast/ thy comforts." One presumes that he would prefer Lucre's happiness to be in full leaf when he descends upon it.

Necessary to all the sterile successes of these old ones is the law. To help him succeed to his legitimate inheritance and his fruitful virgin, Witgood makes use of a prostitute and a country innkeeper, practiced in "Dice, Drinke, and Venery." Would he trust his business with the Host?—"Why/ beleeve it, sooner with thee than with a Covy of Counsellors." (I.i.i.48-49) Hoard and Lucre, on the other hand, prefer "the indifferences of the Lawe" or the opinions of such "honest even-minded Gentlemen as Lamprey, Moneylove, and, presumably, Dampit to help them decide who had the better right to cheat a foolish young man. Even Hoard's anger is "just."

The law is everywhere in this play, as it is in most of the other Jacobean City Comedies, and almost always it
is associated with some sexual reference. When Witgood seems to be in the way of gaining a rich widow, his creditors woo him with their secret gifts to gain his future custom and he responds accordingly: "You doe so ravish mee with kindnesse, that I'me constrainde, to play the maide and take it." (III.i.54-55) Later, when he seems to have fallen out of favor with the Widow Medlar, they resume their roles as carnivores, eager to make the "little pitte," in this case the jail, the mouth to hell rather than the gateway to fecundity. At their instigation Witgood has been arrested for his debts.

SECOND CREDITOR. Wee must have either mony or carcasse.

WITT-GOOD. Alasse what good will my carcasse do you?

THIRD CREDITOR. Oh tis a Secret delight we have amongst us, we that are usde to keepe birds in cages, have the heart to keepe men in prison, I warrant you. (IV.iii.64-65)

Witgood calls his tormentors "beasts" and "Devills" and they reply, "Do you call us divvills, you shall find us Puritanes,/ beare him away." (IV.iii.64-65) For the puritan merchants, legalists of the first degree, the nurturing of the flesh and the tearing of it are not very different; circumstances and the legal alternatives determine their choices. 44

Hoard, once he becomes Witgood's seeming competitor for the hand of the Widow Medlar, is more interesting metaphorically than the equally legalistic and equally sterile
Lucre. If he can succeed in beating out his younger rival, he will so discompose his enemy, old Lucre, as to possibly destroy him: he will "fall" upon him "like a secret and dispatchful plague." (II.i.49) Hoard, himself, is, in the Courtesan's words, "a dry oake." (IV.i.69) The two notions are brought together most graphically when Hoard, the possessor of the Widow, confronts his former nemesis: "Ha, ha, ha, if every man that swells in malice,/ Could be reveng'd as happily as I:/ He would chuse hate, and forswear amity." (IV.i.101-103) This is the form the new bridegroom's tumescence takes, his swelling act on his wedding day.

Two other passages should be noted because the joys of fertile marriage they describe are so very different from what Witgood hopes to gain in his "Virgins love, her portion, and her Vertues."

HOORD. Who would not wed; the most delitious life, No joyes are like the comforts of a wife. (V.i.38-39)

What are these solemn joys and sweet comforts?

HOORD. What a Sweet blessing has thou. Maister Hoord above a multitude . . . not only a wife large in possessions, but spatiouis in content, she's rich, she's yong, she's fayre, she's wise, when I wake I thynke of her lands that revives me, when I go to bed, I dreame of her beauty, and thats ynough for me, she's worth 4. hundred a yeare in her very smock, if a man knewe how to use it, but the jou- ney will bee all in troth into the Country, to ride to her Lands in state and order . . . the sight of which will so vexe my Adversary Lucre, for weele passe by his dore of purpose, make a little stand for nonce, and have our horses Curvet before the window, certainly he will never endure it, but run up and hang himself presently? (IV.iv.1-20)
The ironies in this last passage are delicious. If, in *The Tempest*, Ferdinand was describing the ideal Renaissance marriage when he hopes for "quiet days, fair issue, and a long life/ With such love as 't is now," Hoard doesn't seem to have gotten the hang of it. To him, his new wife is no woman at all; she is her mythical properties. They are rich garments for her and potentially for him; they are all that is to be seen. As a result, she is "large" and "spacious"; she revives an old moneylender on his awakening and she gives him something to dream on. At least Hoard is correct when he says that "she's worth 4. hundred a yeare in her very smock, if a man knewe how to use it." Witgood, a man more interested in fertile realities than in outer trappings, has made her, properly covered, worth at least that much to himself. Who, then, in this lovely new world, is the saint, who the sinner?

IV

Both E. M. W. Tillyard in *The Elizabethan World Picture* and Theodore Spencer in *Shakespeare and the Nature of Man* find an analogy between the pattern to Elizabethan tragedies and the myth of the fall from Eden. When a Doctor Faustus or a Richard Crookback aspires to a position beyond his reach, they, like Adam and Eve before them, must come to grief. Jacobean City Comedies, too, make better sense when they are compared to a Biblical analogue. In what is,
admittedly, sometimes more of a parody than an allegory, they mimic, not the legalistic morality of the Old Testament with its jealous and vengeful God, but the plan for salvation presented in the Gospels. In a rather stilted and conventional final speech the Courtesan sounds like a latter-day Mary Magdalene:

CURTIZAN. Lo, Gentlemen, before you all
In true reclaymed forme I fall,
Hence-forth for ever I defie,
The Glances of a sinnefull eye,
Waving of Fans, which some suppose,
Tricks of Fancy, Treading of Toes,
Wringing of Fingers, byting the Lip,
The wanton gate th'alluring Trip,
All secret friends and private meetings,
Close borne letters, and Baudes greetings,
Fayning excuse to weomen's Labours,
When we are sent for to'th next Neighbours,
Taking false Phisicke, and nere start,
To be let blood, the signe be at heart,
Removing chambers, shifting beds,
To welcome Frends in husbands steads,
Them to enjoy, and you to marry,
They first servd, while you must tarry,
They to spend and you to gather,
They to get and you to father,
These and thousand thousand more,
Now reclaymed I now abhore. (V.ii.157-178)

Uninspired as the speech and its poetry may be, it does present the proper sort of ethical ending to plays of this sort.

The sowing of one's wild oats, at least when one is young, seems to be an absolute necessity in this brave new world. There is something of a paradox involved here, rather like, though not the same as Milton's paradox of the fortunate fall. By living outside the law for a time, the
young people in the play are freed from the law when they are reclaimed to the ethical life. Just as the chief followers of Jesus were rough-tongued fishermen, harlots, and reformed publicans, while his enemies were members of the legal and legalistic establishment of the day—the scribes, the Pharisees, the Roman officials—so, in Jacobean City Comedies, the heroes are the free spirits, the villains the supporters of law and order. The law in the latters' hands is not only a sham, but also a rigid system which denies love and fertility. As a result, after Witgood has triumphed over the "devils" in "hell" during his personal dark night of the soul, he is rewarded as City heroes usually are—with a place in the country, there to live the just and faithful life:

Lend me each honest hand, for here I rise,
A reclaymede man loathing the generall vice.
(V.ii.194-195)

Such is the ethical pattern to A Trick to Catch the Old One and other plays like it.
NOTES

CHAPTER TWO


3 Othello (I.i.87-88), ed. Gerald Eades Bentley, p. 1022.


6 Frye, p. 167.

7 Plato's intent to banish poets from his ideal Republic is, of course, well known. Aristotle, as the Poetics makes clear, found them more congenial.


22. Elizabethan Dramatists, p. 93.


30 "Oedipus Rex as the Ideal Tragic Hero of Aristotle," Classical Weekly, 6, No. 1 (October, 1912), 1-4.


35 Poor Thomas Kyd's history should be recalled. Because of some papers found among his possessions which the authorities considered "heretical" and "blasphemous," he was imprisoned and probably tortured. Such examples would

36 According to some scholars these two, along with Chapman and some others, belonged to what has been called the "School of Night" poets. What opinions this group shared, and what sordid practices they may have engaged in, has been the subject of a good deal of speculation. The whole notion is suspect at the very least.

37 For the charges leveled against Marlowe by one Richard Baines, see G. B. Harrison, Elizabethan Plays and Players (London: Routledge, 1940), pp. 119-121.

38 Even the dating of Marlowe's Doctor Faustus presents problems to anyone trying to discover his true opinions. Unlike The Jew of Malta which presents Christians in an unfavorable light, Doctor Faustus offers a conventionally Christian schema. I would agree with the scholars who make it an early play; for a compelling argument making it one of his last plays, see Harry Levin's brilliant chapter, "Science Without Conscience," in his The Overreacher (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1952), pp. 108-135.


40 See his "Ethics in the Jacobean Drama: The Case of Chapman," Essays in Dramatic Literature, ed. Hardin Craig (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1935), pp. 25-46. Craig himself was never as naive as some of those who followed his lead; he recognized that Machiavellianism (or Baconism) was not foreign to human inclinations, especially during the Renaissance. See The Enchanted Glass, pp. 141-142.

41 "Tragic farce" is T. S. Eliot's term. See Elizabethan Dramatists, p. 63.


43 Compare this exchange to the one between Subtle, Face, and Doll Common in the opening scene of Jonson's The Alchemist.

44 For the legalistic premise behind puritanism, see Michael Walzer, The Revolution of The Saints (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1965).

CHAPTER THREE

PROTOTYPES: MIDDLETON'S CITY MORALITIES

The Family of Love and Your Five Gallants are the least admired of Middleton's City Comedies. Both deserve their lack of reputation, but not for the reasons usually given. Moreover, when they are understood for what they are, and what their author was trying to achieve when writing them, they provide valuable insights into Middleton's better plays and what he learned while creating such aesthetic "failures."

In both plays we have a romantic plot and a pair of romantic lovers set against other plots and characters ranging from the merely venial to the out and out depraved. The chief complaints against these two plays are that such plot and character mixing is, at best, indecorous, and, at worst, absurd. Both charges, and all those in between, are at least partially true. But, because his accusers sometimes fail to realize Middleton's greatest limitation as a dramatist, and because they do not always detect his sometimes sardonic purposes, the reasons why such combinations seldom please often go unnoticed.

In the first place, Middleton, like many of his fellow dramatists (notably Marlowe and Jonson), found it very difficult to create a "good" woman who was also believable and appealing. T. S. Eliot, in his appreciative essay on
Middleton, commends him for his creation of Moll Cut-Purse, the titular heroine of *The Roaring Girl*. In Eliot's words, Middleton in that play wrote "one comedy which more than any Elizabethan comedy realizes a free and noble womanhood."\(^3\) Much as one might approve of Eliot's judgment and the system of values on which it is based, his opinion as to what constitutes a "free and noble" woman is as eccentric as Moll herself. "She may rant, she may behave preposterously," he tells us, "but she remains a type of the sort of woman who has renounced all happiness for herself and who lives only for a principle."\(^4\) (The model for Middleton and Dekker's Moll was an actual woman, alive and notorious in London when the play was presented. One contemporary account states that she actually appeared on stage after at least one performance "in mans apparel and in her boots and with a sword at her syde, she told the company then present that she thought many of them were of opinion that she was a man, but if any of them would come to her lodging they would finde she is a woman; and some other immodest and lascivious speaches she also used . . . ."\(^5\)

Without debating Eliot on his interpretation of the Moll of the play, it is permissible to say that the values he so much admires are neither very feminine ones nor even comic ones. Moll is much closer to the female Quixotes popular in the eighteenth century\(^6\) than she is to Shakespeare's Rosalinds and Violas. And she is the best of Middleton's
fully-realized "good women"—a girl so masculine only a private inspection would reveal her to be different from her male cronies.

The romantic plots in these two plays are not aesthetically displeasing because they do not belong in the same plays with other, more satiric actions. Shakespeare and Donne, in their different mediums, proved that the glory of baroque art resides in its tendency to juxtapose contradictory ideas and materials in some new and brilliant way. The romantic actions are weak because, in their own way, they are deficient, they are bloodless. Except for two brief exchanges (to be discussed shortly), the lovers in *The Family of Love*, Gerardine and Maria, might as well be, when in each other's company, ventriloquist's dummies mouthing not very original variations on already hackneyed Petrarchan love conceits. Furthermore, their language of love is not even well-written. It is stilted and, finally, tedious. Compare almost any of this pair's dialogues to those between Greene's Lacy and Meg in *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, or Dekker's Lacy and Rose in *The Shoemakers' Holiday*, or Shakespeare's Rosalind and Orlando in *As You Like It*, and Middleton's failure is immediately apparent. Behind the tropes, the similes, and the extended compliments in those plays authentic lovers can be found; such is not the case in *The Family of Love*. 
The lovers in *Your Five Gallants* are even less interesting than Gerardine and Maria. Here we have the redoubtable Fitsgrave and the dutiful Katherine. The serious names Middleton gave them is no accident. While Fitsgrave busily spies out vice without being tainted himself, Katherine mourns for exactly the right length of time the death of her beloved and wealthy father and then pleads with her suitors for "the quiet respite of one month" before she decides between them. When she is compared to Shakespeare's Olivia in *Twelfth Night*, another professional mourner, she is seen to be what she is, almost an abstraction. Olivia can glut herself with her grief because the man who pursues her does not capture her fancy; when Viola, in the disguise of a man appears, all her sorrow over the loss of her dear brother disappears and she is ready for the chase. Katherine is colder and less human. Even though she prefers Fitsgrave to her other suitors (the exchange of love tokens makes that, at least, clear), she will weigh their merits for a month without the distraction of their presences. (How she will come to know them by avoiding them is never made clear.) Olivia is at least intelligent on an instinctual level. What she wants is a male version of Viola, and that, when she marries the twin Sebastian by accident, is what she gets. Poor Katherine, on the other hand, not only does not know what she wants, she has to depend on a man,
Fitsgrave, to unmask her false suitors. No self-respecting romantic heroine should have to fall so low.

There are two interesting passages in The Family of Love which, even though their promise is quickly dissipated, suggest where Middleton's real strengths lie and predict his future course. Naturally enough, both show a degree of naughtiness rather than sentimentality on the part of the romantic leads. In quite a nice parody of Shakespeare's balcony scene Maria advises her lover not to ascend to her:

Be thou as loyal as I constant prove,  
And time shall knit our mutual knot of love.  
Wear this, my love's true pledge. [Throws it down.]  
I need not wish,  
I know thou wo't return, [n]or will I say  
Thou may'st conceal thyself, being return'd,  
Till I may make escape, and visit thee.  
I prithee, love, attempt not to ascend  
My chamber-window by a ladder'd rope:  
Th' entrance is too narrow, except this post,  
Which may with ease,—yet that is dangerous:  
I prithee, do it not. I hear some call:  
Farewell!  
My constant love let after-actions tell. [Exit above.]  
(I.ii.130-142)

Unfortunately, Gerardine does not take up the challenge, and the opportunity is lost.

The other passage to be examined appears when Gerardine leaves his hiding place in Maria's apartment for the second time. The language he uses in his attempt at talking her into bed is fascinating. After many exalted compliments and mutual pledges of eternal love on both sides, Maria says:

... nor shall erroneous men  
Pervert my settled thoughts, or turn mine eye
From thy fair object, which I will pursue,
Rich in thy love, proud of this interview.

Ger. I'll suck these accents: let our breaths
        engender
A generation of such pleasing sounds,
To interchange delights. O, my blood's on fire!
Sweet, let me give more scope to true desire.

Mar. What wouldst thou more than our minds'
        firm contract?

Ger. Tut, words are wind; thought unreduct to act
Is but an embryon in the truest sense.

Mar. I am beleague[r]d; I had need of sense:
        You make me blush: play fair yet above board.
        (III.i.33-45)

There are some nice echoes of Falstaff, Richard III, and
Hotspur in this exchange, but the most interesting compari-
son that can be made is between these romantic lovers and
Beatrice-Joanna and De Flores, a most unsavory couple, in
Middleton and Rowley's The Changeling. When De Flores ac-
cepts his commission from Beatrice-Joanna to murder her
fiancé, he can only think of his future reward:

        Oh my blood!
        Methinks I feel her in mine arms already,
        Her wanton fingers combing out this beard,
        And being pleased, praising this bad face.
        (II.ii.147-149)

Later, when he comes to claim his prize, Beatrice-Joanna is
astonished at his boldness.

De F. I have eas'd you
        Of your trouble, think on't, I'm in pain,
        And must be eas'd of you; 'tis a charity,
        Justice invites your blood to understand me.
        (III.iv.98-100)
Her response, some lines later, is equally interesting:

Why, 'tis impossible thou canst be so wicked,
Or shelter such a cunning cruelty,
To make his death the murderer of my honour!
Thy language is so bold and vicious,
I cannot see which way I can forgive it
With any modesty. (III.iv.120-124)

Both Gerardine and De Flores gain their ends, though, as befits the respective genres of their plays, with quite different results. De Flores and Beatrice-Joanna are ultimately destroyed, while Gerardine and Maria gain permission for a hasty marriage, one thousand pounds, and the promise of an heir very early in their life together. But, as these passages indicate, Middleton's true skill comes into play only when he is creating less seemly lovers or ideal lovers in their less seemly moments. Eventually, he had the good sense to realize it. Richard Levin, in his article on The Family of Love notes that the dramatist soon gave up the deadly set pieces which so mar this play—in fact, that by the time he came to write A Chaste Maid in Cheapside "we can measure Middleton's remarkable artistic growth over the intervening years... in the way he avoids representing the lovers' emotions in the main action, treating it as a donnée and concentrating instead on their conflict with Moll's parents..." Thus, Middleton's failure in creating "good" and also real women in these early plays is the first thing to be kept in mind when appraising them.
II

If a case is to be made for Harbage's notion of special plays for special audiences, these two would serve as nicely as any others to support his contention. While each has an authentic comic structure (to be discussed later in this chapter), it is impossible to deny that much of the action and many of the jokes in both plays seem to have been put there, not to advance the plot, but to titillate the self-approving appetites of self-approving young fops, and, perhaps, even to assure to himself Middleton's own sense of superior cleverness in such a company. There are times in both plays, but especially in The Family of Love, when they seem to be more college revues, full of insider's jokes, than serious works of art. Such lapses may have delighted the audience, but they are usually, though not always, blemishes on the plays. That is the second fault to be admitted, and the second important aesthetic consideration to be examined, before any attempt can be made to determine the merits of these two works and their place in the canon of Middleton's City Comedies.

Though both Your Five Gallants and The Family of Love are richly satirical works, there is a difference in their tone and technique. Your Five Gallants is satirical in the manner of Jonson's great middle comedies, though hardly on a par with them. While Middleton, like Jonson, alludes
continually to events and circumstances outside his plays, the main thrust of his satire is directed inward at the society of cheaters themselves, who spend most of their time cheating each other. While some small amount of outside capital is necessary to get the game started (and even that is usually gained from fools who hope to make a fast pound themselves), it never enriches any of the gallants for very long. In this world, a pickpocket loses his money to a gambler who gives it to his whore who gives it to her gigolo who is robbed by the pickpocket. It is a neverending cycle, rather like the operations of the Mafia, or the Cosa Nostra, or whatever fashionable name they are called by this year. Pursenet, the pocket-gallant, explains it well when he takes inventory of the goods he has stolen from his friend Tailby, the whore-gallant:

Let me behold my purchase,
And try the soundness of my bones with laughter.
How? is not this the chain of pearl I gave
To that perjured harlot? 'tis, 'sfoot, 'tis,
The very chain!—O damned mistress!—Ha!
And this the purse which, not five days before,
I sent her fill'd with fair spur-royals? Heart;
The very gold! 'Slife, is this no robbery?...
Well, what a horrible age do we live in, that a man cannot have a quean to himself! let him but turn his back, the best of her is chipt away like a court leaf, that when a man comes himself, has nothing but bumbast; and these are two simple chippings here. Does my boy pick and I steal to enrich myself, to keep her, to maintain him? why, this is right the sequence of the world. A lord maintains her, she maintains a knight, he maintains a whore, she maintains a captain. So in like manner the pocket keeps my boy, he keeps me, I keep her, she keeps him; it runs like quicksilver from one to another. . . . O fine world, strange devils, and pretty damnable affections!

(III.ii.73-112)
Despite the many absurdities in this play, it is hardly
Middleton's worst. It is deficient by comparison; Jonson
did it better, and Middleton improved on it in his other
City plays.

The Family of Love, on the other hand, is probably as
clever an example of its sort to be found among extant
Elizabethan-Jacobean texts. It is not surprising that so
few plays of the same kind managed to survive. Though
there is an internal coherence to the play, the impression
the reader is left with is that much of the business and
many of the witty sallies are directed at external sources
not really important to it. Levin is quite right when he
claims that Middleton's purpose is not merely to ridicule
an obscure puritan sect.8 But what is his purpose? Too
much of the time it is obscured by his young man's desire
to show his skill at parody and burlesque. In A Trick to
Catch the Old One we also have a good deal of incidental
satire, but we never lose sight of the main action. In
The Family of Love, we often do. It is a serious flaw.

Any number of examples could be given to demonstrate
this making of the parts greater than the whole, but a few
will suffice. To begin with there are the epic greetings
to the dawn by Purge and Glistler, which we have not been
prepared for, which are totally out of character, and, fi-
nally, which make only a burlesque kind of sense in their
contexts. In II.i.1-3, Purge begins his day with "The
grey-eyed morning braves me to my face,/ and calls me sluggard: 'tis time for tradesmen to be in/ their shops." Doctor Glister, not a particularly poetic man, begins the same morning with "The tedious night is past, and the jocund morn/ looks more lively and fresh than an old gentlewoman's glazed face in a new periwig." (II.ii.1-3). What is the point to such exalted language from these two, quite dishonorable men? Furthermore, why give such a wrenched simile to Glister if such a habit of speech on his part is not to be more fully developed? I can think of no reason except that the author wanted to demonstrate his own cleverness and, perhaps, exercise his audience's wit.

Whether or not Middleton knew of Donne's works, then only circulated in manuscript, many of the other absurdities in his early plays correspond to the pose Donne assumed in some of his early poems. In the scenes involving Lipsalve and Gudgeon, we are treated to cynical young men who know there is no such thing as a constant woman. All women, in their opinions, are "weathercocks." "I'll tell thee, there's no creature more desirous of an honest name, and worse keeps it, than a woman." (I.ii.37-39) Finally, Lipsalve offers us the traditional and nonsensical wisdom on the nature of a wife:

Didst ever see the true picture of a lover? I can give thee the hieroglyphic; and this it is: a man standing naked, a wench tickling him on the left side with a feather, and pricking him under the right side with a needle. The allegory, as I take, is this:
that at the first we are so overjoyed with obtaining a wife, that we conceive no heaven like to the first night's lodging; and that's the significance of the left side, for wives always in the night take the left-side place: but, sir, now come to the needle on the right side,--that's the day-time, wherein she commands; then, sir, she has a certain thing called tongue, ten times more sharp than a needle, and that, at the least displeasure, a man must have shot quite through him. (I.ii.18-30)

(It should be added that these wiseacres' pert wisdom not only prevents them from distinguishing between the faithful woman and the roundheels in the play, but it also sets them up for embarrassing attempts at both sorts, all of which fail.) While there is some slight connection between such wit and the major themes of the play, such jokes are, for the most part, mere excrudences.

Gerardine, too, is something of a Donnesque figure, but of a different sort. Instead of being a cynical young gallant, he is a master of the paradoxes inherent in any love debate. The love debate is, of course, very old in Western literature, older than Catullus, and probably older than Aristophanes. But, if Donne's wit is to be taken for the very model young men wished to imitate, then Gerardine's logic is mostly contemporary. One example will serve to show his style at its worst:

Hear me exemplify love's Latin word
Together with thyself:
As thus:--hearts join'd, Amore: take A from thence,
Then more is the perfect moral sense,
Plural in manners, which in thee do shine
Saint-like, immortal, spotless, and divine:
Take M away, ore in beauty's name
Craves an eternal trophy to thy fame:
Lastly, take O, in re stands all my rest,
Which I, in Chaucer-style, do term a jest.

(III.ii.46-55)

Fortunately, before we lose all respect for the hero who made such a speech and the heroine who almost gave in to it, an interruption occurs. While the Latin parses properly, the speech is bad Middleton, and even worse Donne.

Among other digressions, we have some direct advice offered to the audience by Purge: "Look too't, you that have such gadders to your wives! self-willed they are as children, and i'faith, capable of not much more than they, peevish by custom, naturally fools" (III.iii.113-116), and a long, tedious section on "the club law" (V.iii.2ff), full of allusions to special interest groups and special languages. Neither of these sections is particularly interesting or particularly valuable to the play. When Middleton learned to exclude such claptrap and avoid overly righteous women, he became the dramatist he could be.

III

The Family of Love is one of Middleton's earliest plays, though hardly the first of his to be published. Despite its flaws, which I have been describing, at least the rudiments of the formula employed more skillfully later by both Middleton and Jonson can be found in this play. We begin with the usual blocking character, in this case one
Doctor Glister, the heroine's guardian, preventing the marriage of his niece to her beloved Gerardine, a gentleman. Gerardine's "lands be in statutes"; perhaps, like other young heroes of his sort, he got in so lamentable a legal position because of his own youthful follies. If so, it is never made clear to us; instead, we see him only as an honorable young man and a devoted lover. Moreover, with the aid of Maria's dowry, all encumbrances on his estate could be removed, and the young couple could live happily ever after. All of this means nothing to Glister. He is a curious figure and probably the most interesting character in the play. Lecherous, avaricious, clever—and, most important, patient—he is the obstacle in Gerardine's path to his true love. He says, on spying a new suitor wooing his niece beneath her balcony,

    what, more flutterers about my carrion? more battery to my walls? shall I never be rid of these Petronel Flashes? . . . Young wenches now are all o' the hoigh: we that are guardians must respect more besides titles, gold lace, person, or parts; we must have lordships and manors elsewhere as well as in the man; wealth commands all; and wealth I'll have, or else my minion shall lead apes in hell.

(III.ii.100-110)

The epithets he applies to his ward, his "carrion" and his "minion," plus his desire to gain at least a wealthy lord for her would seem to make him a greedy old man like the ones we are already familiar with. He is much more than that. First of all, whatever his age, he, like Volpone, is sexually capable—he cannot be accused of sterility like
the Hoards and Lucre of *A Trick*. Secondly, his willingness to let his ward die a virgin ("to lead apes in hell") if he cannot achieve his goal makes him something of an overreacher, willing to gamble everything on the main chance. In this he is closer to Massinger's Sir Giles Overreach than to the tricky oldsters in the other city plays. Finally, and paradoxically, he is the scourge of the less accomplished rogues, Lipsalve and Gudgeon. The main plot, then, details the contest between Gerardine and this formidable antagonist—with Maria's fate hanging in the balance.

Before any coherent description of the battle between Glister and Gerardine can be given, the City, as defined in this play, must be described. Dante, in his magnificently organized world of the after-life was able, not only to fit each crime to its proper punishment, but also to discover a system which rated how serious each sin was on a comparative scale. Such judgments are not so simple in this version of Middleton's City. Levin, in his article on the play, describes three plots and three degrees of morality or immorality, all of which are connected at least causally. He places Lipsalve and Gudgeon, who are lecherous gallants without any redeeming merits, on the lowest rung of his moral ladder. The city folk, the Purges, the Glisters, etc., are a step up. Gerardine and Maria, despite their trickeries and irregular sexual activities, have
crossed the line between what is immoral and what is, at
the very least, healthy. There is nothing wrong with Pro-
fessor Levin’s system of values, but it is remarkably un-
complicated, and the play is not. How does one decide that
Lipsalve and Gudgeon are even less decent than Mistress
Purge? The answer lies in the ending, usually a good place
to begin when making ethical judgments. Lipsalve and Gud-
geon are confined, as a result of Doctor Glister’s minis-
trations, to their close-stools, while Mistress Purge is
allowed to continue in her religious enthusiasm. Glister
loses the reflected glory of his niece’s possible ladyship
and a thousand pounds, but he keeps his reputation. Purge
is discomfited, as he deserves to be, but his shame is not
published abroad. Mistress Glister knows all, which is not
very much, but she cannot complain. None of these is pun-
ished in any serious way. The reasons why they are not is
more important than Levin’s treatment indicates.

First of all, what is meant by a "gallant" in this play
and in Your Five Gallants? At least in Your Five Gallants,
a brave front seems to be enough. Primero, the bawd-
gallant, explains how a particularly clever trick at cards
rescued him from beggary:

That secret twitch got me five hundred pound
Ere ’twas first known . . . .
’Twas a blest invention;
I’d been a beggar many a lousy year
But for my twitch: it was the prettiest twitch!
Many over-cheated gulls have fatted
Me with the bottom of their patrimonies,
E'en to the last sop, gaped while I fed 'em,
Who now live by that art that first undid 'em.
(I.i.151-161)

Frippery, the broker-gallant, describes a similar rise in fortune by less than honorable means, in his case from a serving man to a well-to-do pawn broker and money lender:

but as I strive to forget the days of my serving,
so I shall once remember the first step of my rising; for, having hardly raked five mark together, I rejoiced so in that small stock, which most providentially I ventured by water to Blackwall among fishwives; and in small time, what by weekly return and gainful restitution, it rize to a great body, beside a dish of fish for a present, that stately preserved me a seven-night.
Nor ceas'd it there, but drew on greater profit;
For I was held religious by those
That do profess like abstinence,
And was full often secretly supplied
By charitable Catholics,
Who censur'd me sincerely abstinate,
When merely I for hunger, not for zeal,
Eat up the fish, and put their alms to use!
Ha, ha, ha!
(I.i.298-314)

After such a rise, what can a gallant do but carry on?

Frippery explains the code to us before leaving, in all of his appropriated finery, to call on the rich orphan, Maria:

Now to the deceas'd knight's daughter,
Whom many gallants sue to, I 'mongst many;
For
Since impudence gains more respect than virtue,
And coin than blood, which few can now deny,
Who're your chief gallants than but such as I?
(I.ii.331-336)

While we are never told how Lipsalve and Gudgeon got enough money to achieve their positions as gay boulevardiers, to keep pages, and pursue their lusty careers, we do know that, however short-lived their successes, they did travel in the
best circles, at least for a time. They were Gerardine's intimates, if not his friends. Though not very successfully, they did frequent Court circles. Gerardine says of them: "they were infamous in the court, and now are grown as notorious in the city." (V.iii.47-49) Obviously, there is a distinction to be made between them and Gerardine, the play's hero, whatever appearances they share.

In accordance with some of the oldest traditions of comic theater, they are the zanies—not the professional fools Shakespeare made wise—but fools, well-placed and well-financed, and therefore that much more foolish in their obsessions. Like the absurd characters ridiculed in farces, they are made to suffer physical indignities; besides Glist-ter's purge and its unsavory results, they are also tricked into whipping each other without benefit of outer garments, each thinking the other a spirit capable of providing, if only beaten thoroughly enough, the desired Mistress Purge. Lust being their only interest, they are much more "humour" characters than anyone created by Jonson, so famous for such an approach to comedy, with the possible exception of Morose in Epicoene. These two, in their lechery, provide a kind of leitmotif for the play, but they are not really very important to its ethical scheme. They are treacherous (Lipsalve, in the disguise of Gerardine attempts to seduce his friend's beloved) and they are absolutely single-minded in their quest. But they are also inept and never really
very dangerous. Even when their prey is willing to be preyed upon, they fail for embarrassing reasons. Their ending befits their beginning.

A step up from them, at least in terms of complexity, are the Purges. Mistress Purge, the Familist, seems, at first glance, only an arrant hypocrite. A lady, at least in her own terms, she prepares herself carefully for her devotions: [to Club, her servant] "see . . . that my shoes be very well blacked against I go to the Family (I.iii.55-57), and, when she is on her way, "Fie, fie, Club, go a' t' other side the way, thou collowest [Bullen defines this as "begrimest"] me and my ruff; thou wilt make me an unclean member i' the congregation." (III.iii.1-3) She cannot bear to have the word "organ," with either of its meanings, uttered in her presence.12 Yet after the lights have gone out in her sect's sanctuary, she is willing, even eager, when the fit of religious zeal is upon her, to join with the male members of her congregation in a most literal sense. In the dark she is closer to the newly-saved described in The Grapes of Wrath or Elmer Gantry than to the dour Puritan women who approved of the Salem witch trials, Jonathan Edward's sermons and the branding of Hester Prynne. Master Purge, her husband, describes her state of exaltation after an evening with the Family; she must have achieved true ecstasy:
I shall expect my wife anon, red-hot with zeal, and big with melting tears; and this night do I expect, as her manner is, she will weep me a whole chamber-pot full. (III.iii.127-130)

Moreover, when she is not in the proper spirit to share her enthusiasms with her co-religionists, she is ministered to by Doctor Gllister who describes her as his "vessel of ease." (II.iv.145) Why then does Middleton let her off scot-free, more than that, triumphant over her jealous husband, when he punishes, at least physically, his lecherous gallants? The answer lies in her successes and in the nature of her husband.

There is no room for failure in the worlds of the Jacobean City Comedies. Lipsalve and Gudgeon fail; Mistress Purge never does. Though quite masculine in their interests, the gallants are as ineffective in carrying out their designs as Jonson's effeminate Daw and La-Foole in Epicoene. Mistress Purge is a liar and a cheat and, from one point of view, a hypocrite. But she is not a hypocrite in her own eyes. Eliot called Middleton a cynic, and he was right to do so. But Middleton is a very gentle cynic. Mistress Purge received the Spirit vaginally, and she found wonderful excuses, after she was found out, to discredit all the evidence that could be used against her. Middleton salutes such a response. The gallants are finally guilty because they were at least mildly intelligent and still unsuccessful. Mistress Purge, in Middleton's comic world, is
successful and innocent, like Cokes and Win-the-Fight Littlewit in Jonson's Bartholomew Fair, because she is intellectually and morally incompetent. She is a kind of divine fool when compared to the authentic fools. Gerardine, in his disguise as the judge, recognizes this quality and excuses her moral offences.

Even more important, Mistress Purge deserves to succeed because of her husband: not because he is jealous, which he has every right to be, but because he is only seasonally jealous. Levin was the first to point out some of the similarities between Master Purge and that contented wittol, Allwit, in Middleton's A Chaste Maid in Cheapside.\textsuperscript{13} Master Purge, on his arising, says:

\begin{quote}
I smile to myself to hear our knights and gallants say how they gull us citizens, when, indeed, we gull them, or rather they gull themselves. Here they come in termtine, hire chambers, and perhaps kiss our wives: well, what lose I by that? God's blessing on's heart, I say still, that makes much of my wife! for they were very hard-favoured that none could find in's heart to love but ourselves: drugs would be dog-cheap, but for my private well-practised doctor and such customers. Tut, jealousy is a hell; and they that will thrive must utter their wares as they can, and wink at small faults. (II.i.12-23)
\end{quote}

Both Purge and Allwit are willing to live the good life off the bodies of their wives, but the resemblance ends there. Allwit is an authentic original and probably Middleton's best comic character. Far from being jealous or even complaisant, he exults in his position, not only for what it gets him, but also for what it spares him. Not only does
his professional cuckoldry allow him pleasant unemployment, a full belly, and a warm fire, but it also lets him avoid the arduous task of getting his own children. He is a man content with his leisure. To Purge, on the other hand, his wife is his get-penny. He is only jealous when she offers her wares for her own pleasure, not his profit. In terms of ethics, he is closer to Corvino, Jonson's jealous husband in *Volpone*, than to Allwit. Neither he nor Corvino is as interested in their wives' chastity as they are in the price they can get for the selling of it. So sordidly commercial an attitude invites a little free enterprise on Mistress Purge's part, whatever her other faults.

These are the fools in the play; they are only venial in their practices, not actually depraved. Middleton also tries to offer us rogues. Doctor Glistser and his wife are meant to be authentically evil. But even they are not very impressive threats to the hero and heroine; they convince us only of the generally low moral standards accepted as exemplary by the City's establishment—of which they are a part. It is not that they are not given a chance to excel in wickedness; the roles they play, and the archetypes which they bring to mind are fraught with possibilities. But they are finally wooden characters, with neither clear reasons for their viciousness nor a healthy dose of motiveless malignity; alas, all their evilness is squandered. Since Middleton got better and better at presenting bad
people, we can only assume that these failures were the products of youthful inexperience.

Though ineffective ones, they are the play's only true Machiavellians, and one must make do with what one is offered. Mistress Glister is against dirt of all kinds; she especially hates the kinds brought in by her husband's patients, though it gets her her living:

> I pray, let's have no polluted feet nor rheumatic chaps enter the house; I shall have my floor look more greasy shortly than one of your inn-of-court dining-tables. (II.iv.1-4)

She is less fastidious when advising her niece on matters of the heart. Sounding like a minor, female Iago, she insists that Gerardine, no matter what sacrifices he has made—and at this point in the play they appear to be considerable—will betray his dear Maria:

> So, then, your best-beloved is gone . . . recompense thyself, wench, in a better choice: his love to thee would have been of no longer continuance than the untrussing of his hose. (II.iv.45-49)

Like Iago, she attacks the particular by resorting to a condemnation of the general. If, to Iago, all women are as lecherous as goats and monkeys, to Mistress Glister all men are weathercocks and all women lost part of their happiness when they admitted them to their company as equals. Her reasons for so sour an attitude have not been made clear at this point in the play, but there are at least a few suggestions offered by her choice of metaphors.
Mistress Glisters is in love with synecdoche; in sickness or in health, all men can be described by the state of their legs, none of which seem to please her. Besides the sickly ones, those "rheumatic chaps," she also disapproves of those which have had too much exercise away from home, and those which, as Tennessee Williams' Amanda would put it, are "gay deceivers." 16

If one among a multitude have a good pair of legs, he never leaves riding the ring till he has quite marred the proportion: nay some, as I have heard, wanting lineaments to their liking and calf to support themselves, are fain to use art, and supply themselves with quilted calves, which oftentimes, in reveling, fall about their ankles. (II.iv.20-26)

One suspects, according to Middleton's usual habits (which are particularly pronounced in this play), that she was not really describing legs, but some other part of the male anatomy. When men are not diseased or merely falsely-stuffed codpieces, they take their talents away from home. There is no trust to be placed in any of them.

Of course, Maria is no Othello. She is not taken in by such cynical stuff, and, as a result, Mistress Glisters is not allowed to stand in the path of true love. But she is a force in the play by reason of her position and her logic, and, since she and her husband have actual power over the fates of Gerardine and Maria, she must be treated more seriously than the Purges or the gallants. Her logic, finally, makes her more barren than them. The gallants want women for pleasure. Master Purge wants his woman for
profit. Mistress Purge wants spiritual edification. Mistress Glister wants clean floors; everything else, in her opinion, is either a sham or a disappointment.

Doctor Glister, because of his promise, is finally the most interesting and the most disappointing character in the play. He is hardly sterile like his lady. Purge's wife is his mistress and the report that he has a bastard at suck in the country, though false, is readily believed by those who know him best. Moreover, a great deal is made of his red beard, an evil sign and usually a lascivious one from Judas Iscariot and Loki through Swift's red-haired Yahooos. But, except for his red hairs, he remains indistinct. Iago offers us reasons for his hate, and Shakespeare's brilliance lies in making us disbelieve him. As a result, we move from a disgruntled soldier passed over for promotion and a possible cuckold to a genius of harm, engaged in a diabolic career of evil for its own sake. Middleton's failure, on the other hand, is the result of making us believe that the petty motives Glister states as his own are the real ones. Weak stuff for a villain.

He wants a rich lord for a nephew. He dislikes Gerardine. He wants to humiliate the gallants who pursue his woman. Those are the reasons he gives for his actions, and we have to accept them because there are no other possibilities. There is no passion to him, no mystery, and finally not much of a plan to what he does. We are not even made
really very sure why he holds the opinions that he does, or what he hopes to gain by acting on them. Doctor Glister is probably the least imaginative and the least exciting vicious character in all of Middleton. With the best intentions in the world to do evil, he is, finally, not deliciously ambiguous or even arrogant, but dull.

There is one other aspect to his character that calls for explanation. He serves as a corrector to Lipsalve and Gudgeon even though he is worse than they are, because more intelligent. It is the way of this world. Middleton's early city is not so much murderous as tawdry. As a result, it is almost self-regulating. Each schemer prays on another and, in turn, is preyed upon by someone a bit smarter. But since none of the wicked characters is very smart, there is none of the sense of danger to be found in the later plays or in Jonson's first great city play, *Volpone*. If Glister is the worst character in this play, and he is, Gerardine and Maria have little to fear.

Richard Levin, in the best article on the play (and one of the very few), finds some "causal interconnections" which hold the plots and characters together. He also notes the two "judgment" scenes in which all the major characters appear and sort out their affairs. But even he makes no brief for the play as a great work of art. The best way to view the play, then, is as a kind of prototype, a learning experience for a very young, clever dramatist
and a tentative step towards the definition of a new sub-genre at which he would later excel. There is no consistent pattern to the imagery. There are wasted characters, like Dryfat, the precise merchant, who never fulfill whatever their purpose was. The villains are not very threatening and the hero and heroine are overly pious, despite their early coupling. Worst of all, the feature that most distinguishes the later Jacobean City Comedies is absent: the battle between the forces mildly good and rather evil is never joined. Nevertheless, the play has its moments and it augurs well for the future of its kind and its creator.

IV

*Your Five Gallants* is a step up from *The Family of Love*, but not a very large one. It is a weak play, or, at the very least, an immature one. It offers more problems, if that is the right word, than can be solved. First of all, the villains, though skillful in their own practiced trades, are absolute dupes for each other. This would not be particularly surprising (comedy, as Bergson noted, often being a particularly mechanical form\(^\text{17}\)) but for the fact that the repetition of the same mistakes is so pronounced that Middleton's purpose is finally obscured, unless, that is, his only point is that mistakes and those who make them always tend to repeat themselves. That seems a rather
tired message to repeat for five full acts. Secondly, the hero and the heroine, Fitsgrave and Katherine, are not very interesting; even Gerardine and Maria, with all of their stilted love patter, know, at least, how to copulate before the proper time. If Fitsgrave and Katherine were modern folk, one could imagine them carefully studying marriage manuals the day before the night of their much desired consummation. They are hardly typical Middleton characters. Finally, we are not even sure when the play was written and first performed. Middleton's advocates would like to make it a very early one, a little later than The Family of Love, Blurt, Master-Constable, and The Phoenix, but before his major city comedies. Other scholars put its date of composition around the year 1607, a year or more after he wrote his better city plays. For aesthetic, rather than scholarly reasons, I would support the arguments of Middleton's friends and accept the earlier dating. Furthermore, if such dating is correct, at least tentative answers can be given to the problems raised earlier in this paragraph.

*Your Five Gallants* is set during one of those very special seasons dear to the purposes of Middleton and Johnson—plague time. That means that the city is in a state of chaos and the rogues are free to play. Frippery, the broker-gallant, makes the situation clear. In the taking in of his pawns, he is careful to limit his lending only to those whose parishes have escaped plague deaths the week
before. On a more personal level, Katherine's life, too, is threatened by anarchy. Just as the city has lost its magistrates to the country in their flight from death, she has lost her father, the "rich, deceased Knight," just when she most needs him. Now, without any help, she must choose a husband of merit and substance from a pack of suitors, most of whose claims to distinction reside only in their outer trappings. Furthermore, like most of the ladies in the city plays, the Celia, the Dame Pliant, and the Grace Wellborns, she is not ideally suited, intellectually or perceptually, to make the right choice on her own. Thus the state of the city becomes a metaphor for the state of the heroine of the main plot.

Katherine is typical of the genre, but Fitsgrave, the hero, is not. He is able to discover vice without ever having rubbed shoulders with the vicious. The device he uses for his investigation, the disguise of a scholar newly come to London, is common to this kind of play, but his purity is not. In Fitsgrave we have a hero caught between the worlds of Elizabethan rural comedy and Jacobean City Comedy. Since he also resembles Middleton's earliest "good" male characters, he not only helps us in defining the shift of values from one type of comic play to another, but also in dating this play as an early one.

In approximately the year 1598, Thomas Dekker wrote *The Shoemakers' Holiday*, the quintessential transitional
comedy of the period. Perhaps because Dekker was as willing to please as any of the best comic writers of the time, and, because he was so very much a professional writer, his play mirrors the changing fashions and attitudes better than others. It is a city pastoral. All of the traditional country themes are there, but it takes place in London, and that, necessarily, changes its character. The main plot deals with a pair of lovers whose sentiments and actions, with one exception, could be fitted into any of Shakespeare's romantic comedies. The second sub-plot, too, is traditional. The story of Ralph and Jane, it celebrates constancy in the face of adversity and uncertainty; it is pure folk tale, and not unlike Chaucer's tale of patient Grisildis. Jane, when she is offered a choice between her new, rich suitor and her long-lost and presumed dead husband, now crippled from the wars, picks the latter in a speech as tender as any Dekker wrote:

Whom should I choose? whom should my thoughts affect,
But him whom heaven hath made to be my loue?
Thou art my husband and these humble weedes,
Makes thee more beautiful then all his wealth,
Therefore I wil but put off his attire,
Returning it unto the owners hand,
After euer be thy constant wife.       (V.ii.53-59)

It is a love story as simple and sweet as any to be found, but there is nothing new about it. We could as well be reading of Jacob's additional seven years of labor to gain his beloved Rachel. What is new in the play is the one exception in the romantic plot already mentioned, and the
whole of the first sub-plot, the tale of Simon Eyer's rise to prominence in the City.

Sim's plot defines the shape of the play's world. At first glance, the action which he dominates does not seem particularly unique. His battles with his wife would not be alien to Chaucer's audience and the form they take could come directly from Thomas Deloney's *Jack of Newberry*. But there is a difference: unlike those of Chaucer's Wife of Bath or Deloney's Jack, Sim's arguments are of only incidental importance. They add a humorous touch and they offer us a wonderful character in the redoubtable Margery, but that is all that they do. Sim's real significance lies, not in his skills as a domestic battler, but rather in his position as a rising man in the City where everyone is either rising or falling. In contemporary sociological jargon, his world is one of social mobility. The other plots in the play all depend on this kind of setting and the values attached to it.

Not that *The Shoemakers' Holiday* is a full-blown city comedy of the sort I have been describing, but it is at least an incipient one. Simon Eyer is shrewd, and with a little help from his friend, he rises in wealth and station--but he is never vicious, nor is he guilty of cupidity. In fact, Sim becomes a kind of honorary paterfamilias, not only to the young lovers, but to all the 'prentices in London. It is a genial picture of the "new man" and the new
order of things—but no less a picture of something quite
different from what had been before.

Sir Rowland Lacy himself is the element in the roman-
tic plot which smacks of things to come rather than that
which went before. He is caught somewhere between Shake-
speare's Orlando and Middleton's Witgood. Like Orlando he
is willing to give his all for love and also like him he
is not always as intelligent as his lady fair. When, in
his disguise as a shoemaker, he is almost caught by Rose's
father while ministering to her little feet, she finds a
solution not apparent to him.

Sibil. Oh God, what will you doe mistris? shift
for your selfe, your father is at hand, hees com-
ming, hees comming, master Lacie hide your selfe
in my mistris, for Gods sake shift for your selues.

Lacie. Your father come, sweete Rose, what shall
I doe? Where shall I hide me? how shall I escape?

Rose. A man and want wit in extremite,
Come, come, be Hauns still, play the shoemaker,
Pull on my shooe. (IV.iii.20-27)

On the other hand, he has a past that would make an Orlando
blush for shame. Like Witgood, although probably not on so
grand a scale, he has been a scapegrace and a bankrupt.
Now a reclaimed prodigal, he must resort to tricks and a
disguise to regain that which he has lost. These two items
then, Sim's world and Lacy's past, mark the play as a trans-
sitional one between the worlds of the green forests of
Elizabethan comedy and the close city of Jacobean comedy.
Your Five Gallants is also a transitional play of this sort, but with a different bias. Just as Macbeth would be Hamlet if Macduff were the chief protagonist, and Hamlet would be Macbeth if Claudius were the chief protagonist, so The Shoemakers' Holiday would be Your Five Gallants if Sim's world was treacherous and Sir Rowland Lacy pure.

There is only one plot in Your Five Gallants, and, despite its solitary splendor, it is remarkably unimportant. It is a bare frame on which to hang the extravagant varieties of chicanery practiced by the cheating gallants. More than any of his other plays, Your Five Gallants resembles Micro-Cynicon: Six Snarling Satires, Middleton's adolescent attempt at correcting the follies of the world around him. Whether the poet, being green, was only following the fashion of the day, or being young, was capable of seeing everyone else's depravity, is not to be known, or, for that matter, even very important. What is important is that this play spends more time cataloging vices than fitting them into any coherent dramatic structure. There are times when it seems more of an emblem, in the seventeenth-century sense of the word, than a play at all. Fitzgrave's apostrophe on impudence captures this quality:

The devil scarce knew what a portion he gave his children when he allowed 'em large impudence to live upon, and so turned 'em into th' world: surely he gave away the third part of the riches of his kingdom; revenues are but fools to't. The filed tongue and the undaunted forehead Are mighty patrimonies, wealthier than those
The city-sire or the court-father leaves:
In these behold it: riches oft, like slaves,
Revolt; they bear their foreheads to their graves.
What soonest grasps advancement, men[d]s great suits,
Trips down rich widows, gains repute and name,
Makes way where'er it comes, bewitches all?
Thou, Impudence! the minion of our days,
On whose pale cheeks favour and fortune plays.
(IV.v.69-83)

What saves this work from being only a dramatised anatomy of abuses is Middleton's already sprightly sense of humor and his ability to weave even a series of episodes into a coherent pattern greater than the external events which may have inspired them.

Middleton's humor, when compared to Jonson's, is almost whimsical. Jonson, very much the comic Marlowe, offers us rogues who become fools--overreachers who destroy themselves in pursuit of their own overweening ambitions. Even his fools are either despicable, like those in Every Man in His Humour and The Devil Is An Ass, or so foolish that they are not to be held accountable for their actions, like those in Bartholomew Fair. There is a driving force to Jonson's great plays wholly absent in Middleton's comedies. Whatever laughter we get from Jonson's comic figures is derisive; to use an unpleasant series of metaphors--Jonson picks at the scabs on his characters, and we laugh when the rogue who thought himself healthy begins to suppurate. Middleton's comic figures, on the other hand, are fools with a taste for roguery but without enough skill to effect it on a grand scale. They are satisfied with the results
of their petty crimes and they lose their ill-gotten gains without much fuss. They are ordinary rather than epic scoundrels. As a result, they are, if not lovable, at least understandable. While Jonson's Sir Epicure Mammon is dreaming his golden dreams of peacock brains for dinner and Helen of Troy and Cleopatra for desert, Middleton's Tailby, the whore-gallant, congratulates himself on having mistresses kind enough to slip him ten pounds when he needs it and on having a back which is strong enough to earn such favors.

Ser. Mistress Tiffany commends her to your worship, and has sent you your ten pound in gold back again, and says she cannot furnish you of the same lawn you desire till after All-holland-tide.

Tai. . . .

Ha, ha!

This wench will live: why, this was sent like a Workwoman now; the rest are botchers to her. . . .

I commend her more--

Sends back the gold I never saw before.

Well, women are my best friends still, i'faith.

Take lands: give me

Good legs, firm back, white hand, black eye,

brown hair,

And add but to these five a comely stature;

Let others live by art, and I by nature. (IV.ii.78-95)

It would be impossible to imagine one of Middleton's characters hazarding his all to gain the philosopher's stone.

Middleton's notion of what is humorous, and the characters who grow out of it, gives us scenes and even plays which are audacious but never extravagant in Jonson's manner. In his *Conversations*, Jonson told Drummond of Haw-thornden that Middleton (with Markham and Day) "was not of
the number or the Faithfull... i. Poets and but a base fellow." He went on to say that "he [Jonson] hath consumed a whole night in lying looking to his great toe, about which he hath seen tartars & turks Romans and Carthaginians feight in his imagination." Poor Middleton, not being a poet to meet Jonson's specifications, probably slept peacefully, and, if he dreamed at all, dreamt dreams of small people in a convoluted but limited world. But, whatever Jonson's complaints, such a diminishing of scale does not rob Middleton's vision of its integrity or coherence. Unlike Jonson's characters, Middleton's mildly wicked people seldom err when they are practicing their own trades. Instead they are tripped up (Middleton's characters overstep, but they never overreach) when they attempt a new kind of vice alien to their talents, or when they become the conies in another's scheme. In *Your Five Gallants*, Pursenet, the pocket-gallant, serves as a good example of the first kind of failing. By nature and art he is a master of the surreptitious skill of picking pockets, or, at the very least, training others to do so for him. But that is not enough for him; in a proud moment, he decides to become a footpad, a more physical occupation. His hubris costs him a beating, and gains him no financial reward. Almost all of Middleton's gallants fall prey to the second snare: the whore master is a slave to the card table, the gambler to the enticements offered by the whore-gallants'
young ladies. Thus a degree of vice is tolerated in Middleton's world—tolerated in the same way an almost healthy body can tolerate a low-grade infection. Since such small infections and minor vices must finally feed on themselves, they are almost self-regulating. When properly armed against them, the body, on the one hand, and the Witgoods, Gerardines, and Fitzgraves, on the other, are in no serious danger. It is simply the way of the world, and, if anything, the battlers on the side of health, physical and ethical, are stronger for their encounters: their resistance against future attacks has been enhanced.

After all, while impudence may seem astonishing to those who do not practice it, it has never earned a place among the major sins. Moreover, as any student of Restoration comedy would know, it is the fool's vice. Its public nature lays it open to scrutiny by anyone even mildly suspicious. Thus Fitzgrave needs to waste little time in separating his new, supposed friends' jaunty appearances from their thread-bare realities. Even more important, impudent successes breed a self-complacency which makes the fool unaware of the pitfalls which surround him. If Volpone and Mosca had not turned on each other, no other character or agency in their play could have brought them down. In Your Five Gallants, the seemingly credulous scholar, Fitzgrave, uses the hoary device of shields emblazoned with Latin mottoes not understood by their holders to unmask the false
suitors. As in his other plays, the rogues and their whores in *Your Five Gallants* are not only invited to the closing wedding, they are forced, with only a little grumbling on their respective parts, to marry each other. Compare such an ending to the ferocious conclusions to *Volpone* and *Epicoene*—which turn out to be comedies not about marriage at all, but about divorce—and the genial cynicism of Middleton's world view becomes obvious. The impudent deserve each other, but nothing worse than that.

The five gallants in this play, and their female counterparts, are natural dupes for anyone not stupid or desperate: their self-esteem forces them to accept the appearance of gullibility in anyone not of their own tribe. It is a schema popular, not only with Middleton, but with a great number of writers who came before and after him. Pursenet claims to be a man of policy; a fresh whore is catechized on her ability to dissemble; Frippery admits to being no more than the pawned clothes on his back—yet they and their associates are amazed when an intelligent man poses as a dullard and an honest man a thief. To them, it is as if an outsider, not at all like them, has learned the closely kept secrets of their fraternal rituals. In such a world, a bright young man like Fitzgrave, dull though he may be as a character, can only prosper. Like Witgood and Gerardine, he gains the prize, the virtuous maiden and her wealthy fertility. Also like them, after learning all the
tricks his opponents can and have played, he is placed in a position to judge and chastise them. It is not a sentimental play: Fitzgraves cannot effect miraculous conversions and neither can he visit terrible punishments upon his enemies. He would not want to: to do so would be to deny the whole premise behind Middleton's notion of the city as comic. But he can discomfit the impudent and even hold them in check for awhile. All things considered, that is victory enough.

V

Jove in the clouds had his inhuman birth.
No mother suckled him, no sweet land gave
Large-mannered motions to his mythy mind.
He moved among us, as a muttering king,
Magnificent, would move among his hinds,
Until our blood, commingling, virginal,
With heaven, brought such requital to desire
The very hinds discerned it, in a star.
Shall our blood fail? Or shall it come to be
The blood of paradise? And shall the earth
Seem all of paradise that we shall know?
The sky will be much friendlier then than now,
A part of labor and a part of pain,
And next in glory to enduring love,
Not this dividing and indifferent blue.

Wallace Stevens, "Sunday Morning"27

Middleton has been described as a professional, a realist, a cynic, and as a purposely obscure human being, courting no immediate favor and expecting no lasting fame.28 However accurate such designations might be, such words and phrases suggest in themselves pejorative connotations to most Elizabethan scholars. (It is worth noting that from
the information we have received, real rather than legendary, some of the same charges could be leveled at Shakespeare.) Such a prejudicial reading of the terms is unfortunate, not simply because it is unfair to Middleton, but because it misses the point to a whole kind of creative attitude.

Professor Knights worried himself over what he considered the disparity between Middleton's skills as a writer of tragedies and as a writer of comedies. He need not have done so. When a tragedian, the poet was, of course, older and more experienced at his trade, but, except for the changes imposed on him by a different genre, he remained remarkably consistent from his first plays to his last in that most important of categories—the interpretation of human characters, their motives, and their responses to success or failure. What has come to be called, whether it is applauded or attacked, Middleton's "realism" lies behind all of his plays. Unfortunately, realism is not easily defined. At least in Middleton's case, though, a beginning can be made. His realism does not make him merely a harsh chronicler of wasted lives and tawdry settings, the usual stereotyped role assigned to realists. There is a cynical tolerance and even compassion to his work which smacks more of the closing lines to Stevens' stanza than of a hopeless vision of a world already corrupt and soon to be lost. That seems to be a better starting
point to understanding his work than any provided by professional optimists or pessimists.

There have been endless debates over the meanings of such appellations as romantic, classical, realistic, et al., and their even more numerous parents and progeny beginning with prefixes like neo-, pre-, post-, and occasionally even proto-. It is not surprising that we are still confused about the exact dimensions of any of these isms: all of them are overly ambitious in their unrefined forms. They may be, and have been, used to describe historical periods, literary styles, and whole sets of attitudes about art or life or almost anything else. Naturally enough, integrating all of these different emphases into a single coherent description is impossible without allowing innumerable exceptions. But that does not vitiate the importance of the terms themselves; when they are properly limited, they remain invaluable. In such a limited sense, I would like to call Middleton a realist and use that designation to explain what he was about in his writings.

When they emulated their masters, the French and English neoclassicists quite properly made decorum a primary virtue. As far as completeness, manner, and style go, there is little to choose from between Achilles' new shield, Pope's gardens at Twickenham, or Odysseus' very correct behavior, when naked and an alien, before the Princess Nausicaä. The romantics, on the other hand, made uniqueness
the supreme virtue. Sensitivity, the puissant will, the responsive heart—whether in the bosom of Carlyle’s Frederick, Goethe’s Werther, or Wordsworth's Michael—these are the true indicators of the superior human being. Despite the many differences between them, classicism and romanticism share at least one quality: both place great emphasis on the distance between their heroes and the common sort of man. Whether it comes to making tea or love or poetry properly, or slaying enemies with the proper élan, or merely tending one’s sheep faithfully while the rest of the world goes on in its riotous way, the distinction to be made between the special one and the ordinary many is almost an article of faith to both aesthetic credos. Realism narrows the gap.

Knights complains of the ordinariness of many of Middleton’s scenes, as if that would serve to disqualify him as a realist:

reading his comedies as carefully as we can, we find . . . that gallants are likely to be in debt, that they make love to citizens’ wives, that lawyers are concerned more for their profits than for justice, and that cut-purses are thieves. Middleton tells us nothing at all about these as individuals in a particular place and period.29

Such criticism misses the point, as a careful reading of the parts of the plays Knights does admire makes clear. Later in his paragraph, he prefers a brothel scene, obviously written by Dekker in his and Middleton’s The Honest Whore, to any scene, similarly set in the comedies written
by Middleton exclusively. It is an interesting choice. While the scene Knights refers to is vividly realized, it is not "realistic" in any larger sense of the term; rather it is in keeping with the heroine's transformation (in the course of the play's two parts) from a thoroughly professional, but sometimes sad-eyed whore (with, of course, a heart of gold) to a reclaimed woman, a distressingly faithful wife, and, finally, almost a martyr because of her husband's brutality and excesses. It is pure romanticism. Compare that version of reality to the one offered in a key scene in The Changeling. To prove he has committed the murder she commissioned, De Flores returns to Beatrice-Joanna her betrothal ring still on her former fiancé's severed finger.

De F. I've a token for you.

Bea. For me?

De F. But it was sent somewhat unwillingly,
I could not get the ring without the finger.

[Shows her the finger.]

Bea. Bless me! What hast thou done?

De F. Why, is that more
Than killing the whole man? I cut his heart-strings.
A greedy hand thrust in a dish at court,
In a mistake hath had as much as this.

(III.iv.27-32)

Beatrice threatens to become a romantic heroine, like the Honest Whore, with her "Bless me!"—but De Flores returns her to his kind of reality. What is a finger, which might
as easily have been lost at the dining table, to severed heart-strings? Realism makes even horror ordinary by viewing it from a pragmatic perspective.

Knights' notions on what the realist should be are interesting but sometimes contradictory. He should be a camera obscura, but his most important frames should capture characters and scenes which do not belong in or with their surroundings. In other words, Knights' ideal realist, like the classicists and romantics who preceded him, and his illegitimate children, the naturalists, should be in search of the spectacular to set it off from the ordinary he has so carefully limned. If we look at the works of those writers who have been accounted great realists, we find that that is simply not the way it works. The great moments in realistic art come, not when some wunderkind is discovered among the ashes, an Achilles among school girls, or a Billy Budd in a foundlings' basket, but rather when a character, very much rooted in the everyday reality and morality common to his or her world, gains, depending on the genre, a flash of insight before death or marriage. Such insights are important to the characters and to the discerning members of their audience, but they do not change anything on any grand scale. Troy does not fall, evil is not defeated, good is not defined in any lasting way. Life goes on.

Henry James, a great realist of a certain sort, ends his novel, The Ambassadors, on just the right note. After the
reader has been brought through a marvelous series of emotionally understated complications, he is given this:

    So then she had to take it, though still with her defeated protest. "It isn't so much your being 'right'--it's your horrible sharp eye for what makes you so."

    "Oh but you're just as bad yourself. You can't resist me when I point that out."

    She sighed it at last all comically, all tragically, away. "I can't indeed resist you."

    "Then there we are!" said Strether.\textsuperscript{30}

And that is all there is to that.

Realism is not so much a technique or the result of a time or genre, though all of those are important, but rather the result of the attitude of the realistic writer. Defoe was as fine a realist as anyone who ever wrote. He gives us the quintessential realistic character in Moll Flanders. When she discovers that her husband, the father of her children, is also her brother, she claims to suffer all the horrors associated with so archetypal a situation. But she does not tear her eyes out. She does not even leave him immediately. Instead, for two years, she avoids his embraces as often as possible and saves her money. After all, as abhorrent as the coupling might be, it's not really anyone's fault, and there is probably a new husband somewhere, and possibly new children . . .

Out of such stuff grows cynicism. Out of such cynicism grows tolerance. Middleton's bad characters suffer at
last, but the pains inflicted upon them are never excruciatingly severe. They do not deserve, as do Iago and Barb- bas, such treatment; from one point of view, they are not even worthy of it. There is simply not that much difference between his best people and his worst. In The Change-
ling and in Women Beware Women, his last tragedies, it is hard to know who is to be applauded, the villains or the survivors. From his earliest plays to his last ones, he gives us a morally ambiguous, but understandable world. Whether such a world, like Stevens' vision of a demythologi-
gized "blue," is "friendlier" or not is left to the reader's own imagination. But that is the world he gives us.

Neither The Family of Love nor Your Five Gallants can be made into great plays, whatever their appreciators' skills at critical prestidigitation. There is no metaphorical pattern to either of them that would suggest a connection with some more profound interpretation of what it all means. Some of the characters are dull and a few are so indistinct as to defy description. Worst of all, both plays are, on occasion, simply foolish. But that is not to say that they are worthless—either in their own right or as indicators of what Middleton could and would achieve. There are memorable characters, memorable scenes, and even some memorable language to be found here and there. Most important, both plays help to define Middleton's way of seeing his world.
NOTES

CHAPTER THREE

¹All quotations from both plays can be found in Bullen, Thomas Middleton, III.


³Eliot, Elizabethan Dramatists, p. 93.

⁴Elizabethan Dramatists, p. 90.

⁵From Consistory of London Correction Book (1605-1606); this quotation, in a longer form, can be found in E. K. Chambers, "Elizabethan Stage Gleanings," RES, 1 (January 1925), 78 and in Barker, p. 169.

⁶Any number of female protagonists, from Defoe's Moll and Roxana through Jane Austen's Catherine Morland, could be considered questing heroines, but Charlotte Lennox's Arabella serves best as an example of the type. See her The Female Quixote or The Adventures of Arabella, ed. Margaret Daiziel (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970). Lennox's novel was first published in 1752.


The Family of Love or the Familists was a sect which rejected almost all doctrine and ceremony, believing
instead that pure religion meant only loving and being loved. As a result, their devotions celebrated the non-occidental notion of the oneness of God and man, at least when men were capable of loving. Henry Nicolai, a disciple of the sect's founder, David Joris, brought this brand of religion to England from Holland during the middle years of the sixteenth century and founded at least one church. In 1575, despite attacks by the Puritan clergy, they petitioned Parliament for toleration. They were refused. In 1580 Queen Elizabeth ordered them suppressed. The sect slowly died out during the seventeenth century.

9 Middleton occasionally lapsed into a mock-heroic vein in another early play, Blurt, Master-Constable, but there the exalted phrases were put into the mouth of a braggart soldier, and thus, though they were foolish, they were not out of keeping with his character. I know of no other play in which Middleton used this stylistic device.

10 For a complete summary of the several arguments over the play's date, sources, and authorship, see Barker, pp. 159-61. After examining all of the evidence, he concludes that the play was written in 1602-03, that it was published a good deal later than that (when "the newness of it made it much more desired than at this time" as the address to the reader says), and that it might well have been revised and returned to the stage after 1605. He is not satisfied with any of the supposed sources for the play and he rejects the notion of dual authorship offered by Gerald J. Eberle in "Dekker's Part in The Familiar of Love," in Joseph Quincy Adams Memorial Studies, ed. J. G. McManaway, Giles E. Dawson, and E. E. Willoughby (Washington: The Folger Library, 1948), pp. 723-38. All of his conclusions make good sense.


14 Allw. ....

The founder's come to town: I am like a man
Finding a table furnish'd to his hand,
As mine is still to me, prays for the
founder,--
'Bless the right worshipful the good
founder's life.'
I thank him, 'has maintain'd my house this
ten years,
Not only keeps my wife, but a keeps me
And all my family: I am at his table;
He gets me all my children, and pays the
nurse
Monthly or weekly; puts me to nothing,
Rent, nor church-duties, not so much as the
scavenger:
The happiest state that ever man was born to!
(I.ii.11-21)

From Thomas Middleton, A Chaste Maid in Cheapside, ed.
R. B. Parker (London: Revels-Methuen, 1969). Unless other-
wise noted, all quotations are from this edition.

15 Corvino, so jealous a husband that he once threatened
to mure up his wife, the innocent Celia, in a small, dark
room for having looked at a crowd of men from her window,
changes his tune when she refuses to share a bed with Vol-
pone, the man he hopes to inherit from. Suddenly, she has
dishonored and disgraced him, she is an "errant locust," a
"Whore," a "Crocodile" because she will not kiss and tickle
so rich a prospect. Finally, in a paroxysm of rage at her
inconvenient chastity, he defines his code and the code of
the other greedy city schemers:

CORVINO 'Sdeath, if she would but speak to him,
And save my reputation, 'twere somewhat;
But, spitefully to affect my utter ruin--
(III.vii.122-24)

From Ben Jonson, Volpone, ed. Philip Brockbank (New
York: Mermaid-Hill and Wang, 1968). Unless otherwise noted,
all quotations are from this edition.

16 As Amanda prepared her small-chested daughter, Laura,
for her first gentleman caller in Williams' The Glass
Menagerie, so Elizabethan sparks stuffed their codpieces
with bits of cloth and other soft materials to improve their
images. Some exaggerated themselves to the extent that they
could use their excess frontage to carry decorative pins.
See Peter Fryer, Mrs Grundy: Studies in English Prudery

17 Bergson, "Laughter" in Sypher, Comedy, pp. 61-190.

18 The dating of Your Five Gallants is difficult because
the text we have received is probably a revised one. The
chronology printed at the end of the Regent Renaissance
Drama Series' editions of Middleton's plays gives 1607 as
the date when the play was first performed by the Children
of the Chapel. Barker, with better evidence, claims that the play was performed earlier (1604-06) by Paul's Boys (p. 164). For accounts of the journey from the one theater to the other, see R. C. Bald, "The Foul Papers of a Revision," The Library, 4th Ser., 26 (June 1945), 37-50 and Maxwell, "Thomas Middleton’s Your Five Gallants," pp. 30-39.

For examples of the plague lists Frippery so carefully consulted, see F. P. Wilson, The Plague in Shakespeare’s London, pp. 87, 90, 93, and 105-06.

See especially the young prince who is the hero of Middleton’s The Phoenix (1604-05?). Like Fitzgrave, Marston’s Altofronto in The Malcontent, and Shakespeare’s Duke Vincentio in Measure for Measure, Prince Phoenix adopts a disguise the better to spy out the iniquities practiced in his realm. Like his fellow arbiters, he has discovered enough to make judgments by the time he unveils himself.


All quotations are from Bowers’ edition.


29 Drama & Society, p. 258.

CHAPTER FOUR

VARIATIONS ON THE CITY THEME:
MICHAELMAS TERM AND A MAD WORLD, MY MASTERS

A Trick to Catch the Old One does not, of course, stand in solitary splendor above the likes of Blurt, Master-
Constable, Your Five Gallants, and The Family of Love. It is a companion piece to two other Middleton plays, Michael-
mas Term and A Mad World, My Masters. In concert, these three make up the heart of his city canon. All were meant for the same kind of audience, performed by the same "little eyrie of children" (in this case, Paul's Boys), and written in such short order that their proper sequence is still in doubt and their dates (1604-1606) so general that they cor-
respond only to the life of their company. Understanding what these three share is as important to any proper assess-
ment of Middleton's talents as appreciating them for what they are. That is the burden of this chapter: to describe Michaelmas Term and A Mad World, My Masters as both unique works in their own right and as parts of a greater whole, Middleton's little epic on Jacobean city comic life.

All three of these plays offer us similar characters, settings, themes, and problems. From an aesthetic point of view, of course, the like and finally complementary themes are the most important. But they cannot be understood without reference to the other shared characteristics, es-
pecially the problems. In fact, the themes and problems are so inextricably bound together that defining the former
can only mean making peace with the latter. The credit for such a discovery goes to R. B. Parker as he presented it in his intriguing essay, "Middleton's Experiments with Comedy and Judgment."¹ In his treatment, the problems become for the first time, if not the themes, at least a major part of them.

Simply stated, these three plays offer problems because they, like other Middleton plays (The Changeling chief amongst them), seem to be indecorous—not merely in the modern sense of the term in which decorum only means conformance to a sense of propriety, but even according to eighteenth-century usage when a decorous work was one whose parts fit seamlessly into a preconceived notion of the whole. Indeed, if we are to believe some accounts of the high seriousness supposedly brought to English Renaissance aesthetic credoes, these plays were even indecorous in their own day, thorns among such roses as The Merchant of Venice, Donne's headier poems, and Burton's The Anatomy of Melancholy.² Each contains scenes and actions which would seem to be more comfortable in a hortatory, or, at the very least, an exemplary work than in a Middleton comedy. What Parker did in his essay was to make a point of including these supposedly disparate elements in his analysis of the plays. He performed a notable service. But even his treatment is suspect when we realize what it would make of Middleton and his plays.
Parker begins his essay with what I can only regard as a disastrous premise:

At the heart of Middleton's very personal comic style is a tension between skill in the presentation of manners and a desire to denounce immorality. The very brilliance of his manners comedy . . . is apt to obscure his concern with deprecation . . . . Nevertheless, the concern is still there; and unless it is recognized, the distinctive nature of these comedies cannot be grasped . . . 4

What is more, Parker is not offering us a Middleton merely disgusted with your common garden variety of vice and therefore anxious to weed it out. His Middleton has a darker vision: he sees sin in almost Miltonic terms:

It is interesting to note the resemblance between this speech [from The Phoenix, II.i.164-175] and Milton's famous 'Hail, wedded love, mysterious law' passage in Paradise Lost (IV, 750 ff.). Although he frequently satirizes Precisians, Middleton has puritan characteristics himself.5

As a result of his thesis, Parker comes to the conclusion that the poet's comic world has two polarities: a completely amoral vitalism and a more than Calvinistically determined scheme of retribution. He attempts to reconcile them in a strange mixture of realism, irony, and exaggeration, and from either extreme takes refuge in grotesquerie. Whether this problem was a philosophic one or an artistic one rising from technique it is impossible to say.6

The last sentence is properly humble from the interpreter's point of view, but it does not diminish in the least the harshness of the author's basic argument.

With Parker's addition to the literature on Middleton, we have measured out all of the possible ways to see his
comedies from the moral point of view. Harbage gave us an immoral or amoral dramatist, depending on the play he was considering, interested only in pleasing other immoral or amoral young fops and their ladies. Knights gave us a poet sometimes moral, but, for some inexplicable reason, not the least bit interested in moral concerns when he was paid to be a comedian. Parker gives us an extremely moral man at war within himself. On the one hand, he is almost as gloomy about the world's situation and man's nature as the predestinarians and the believers in Calvin's doctrine of the total depravity of mankind; on the other, he is captivated by his own genius at reproducing the vitality the damned so often possess. In none of these treatments is he ever allowed to be an authentic artist with an aesthetic scheme of his own. All, finally, are insulting to Middleton.

But none of these writers can be accused of a personal or even scholarly animus towards the playwright; it is morality, or rather what passes for it in their critical schemata, which is at fault. Parker uses as proofs for his own reading of the plays "the Old Father's criticism of prostitution in Michaelmas Term," Penitent Brothel's repentance in A Mad World, My Masters," and "the curious Dampit scenes in A Trick to Catch the Old One." They are perfectly suitable examples if one wants to prove that Middleton could play the preacher, but in Parker's hands not only
are they taken out of their contexts, but even the ways in which they differ, in form as well as in function, are never explained. In an earlier chapter I quoted Fitsgrave's apostrophe on Impudence from *Your Five Gallants*; more than any other passage in a Middleton play, it is a set piece, emblematic of the values (or lack thereof) in the world of that work.⁸ What Parker has done is to treat the items he presented in the same way. As a result, while critics like Knights and Harbage regard such seeming outbursts as unnecessary blemishes on the surface of amoral works, critics of Parker's persuasion see them as necessary eruptions on the playwright's comic mask, the real man showing through the paint. In neither approach are they allowed to be what they are. It is the natural result of morality hunting and it distorts not only the speeches and scenes in question, but also Middleton's purpose and his plays as carefully constructed artifacts.

In these three plays Middleton has come a long way as an artist from his early pamphlet-writing days and his slightly later period when Jonson's "comicall satyres" served him as dramatic models. What he offers us in *Michaelmas Term* and in *A Mad World, My Masters*, as well as in *A Trick to Catch the Old One*, is his by now fully developed sense of irony— the quality in his writings which has been more celebrated than any other.⁹ For the first time in his work we are given an ironic vision whole rather than
in bits and snatches. It is this achievement which unites the plays and makes any simply moral reading of them, no matter how ingenious, unsatisfactory. When the nature of this achievement is understood, the problems are dispelled, or rather, the seemingly problematical passages and actions can be seen for what they are--complicating but enriching variations on Middleton's city theme.

I

Michaelmas Term is usually considered a better play than A Mad World, My Masters, and therefore a later product of Middleton's invention. Its language and its most dramatically pleasing character, Ephestian Quomodo, woolen draper and magnificent cheat, seem more in keeping with the world of A Trick to Catch the Old One, admittedly the best play of the three, than does anything in A Mad World, My Masters. Yet there is an air of innocence to it that would argue a different order to Middleton's comic progression. In fact, while not exactly romantic in the sense of the earlier Elizabethan comedies with their green worlds and pastoral lovers, it is closer in tone and method to The Phoenix, Middleton's best mildly romantic play and a close forerunner to these, than either of the other two.

There are actually two characters in Michaelmas Term who could be considered romantic leads--though only, of course, within the context of the playwright's sardonic
view of city types and their ways. Richard Easy, a young
man new in his possessions, comes to London during Michael-
mas Term, the most important season of the social and legal
year, to gain "the city powd'ring." That would include
learning how to swear, gamble, and make friends of citizens'
wives and the ladies of the town. Yet Easy, a man described
as "somewhat too open" by one of his friends, is as foolish
and as decent, in a city sense, as Orlando is in As You
Like It. Thomasine, Quomodo's wife, seeming widow, and
temporary wife to Easy, is quite obviously interested in
concupiscent delights which her avaricious husband either
cannot or will not provide her, and she makes her interest
in such matters apparent in language that might shock even
the most tough-minded of Shakespeare's romantic heroines.
Yet she, in her limited role, is as warm, as intelligent,
and as discerning in matters of the brain, heart, and liver
as is Viola in Twelfth Night. These two are mildly damaged,
or, at the very least, shop-worn innocents when they are
compared to their dramatic predecessors, but they are inno-
cents, nevertheless. Moreover, while the world Middleton
puts them in is too predatory to allow them to be purer, it
is still kind enough to allow them to triumph, at least on
a small scale. Given the times, his by now considerable
skills, and his sense of irony, Michaelmas Term is as ro-
mantic a play as Middleton was capable of writing. For
these reasons, and for others which will become obvious,
it, rather than either of the other two, should be considered the earliest play in his trilogy for Paul's Boys.

Michaelmas Term begins with one of the best inductions written for a play of its sort. Four allegorical figures appear, each the spirit of one of the terms, the four seasons during which legal business could be transacted in London, and they make up a most unholy company. Michaelmas Term, being chief amongst them, is hailed by the others according to a ritualized formula that smacks more of a satanic rite than a religious exercise.

FIRST TERM.
Thou father of the Terms, hail to thee.

SECOND TERM.
May much contention still keep with thee.

THIRD TERM.
Many new fools come up and fee thee.

SECOND TERM.
Let 'em pay dear enough that see thee.

(IND.35-38)

What is more, Michaelmas Term's first speech, delivered while he is changing his country garment, "a whitish cloak," for his city gown, bristles with metaphoric possibilities that suggest a dark world indeed.

Lay by my conscience,
Give me my gown, that weed is for the country;
We must be civil now, and match our evil;
Who first made civil black, he pleas'd the devil.
So, now know I where I am, methinks already
I grasp best part of the autumnian blessing
In my contentious fathom; my hand's free,
From wronger and from wronged I have fee,
And what by sweat from the rough earth they draw
Is to enrich this silver harvest, Law.

(IND.1-10)
Then, as quickly as he created it, Middleton dissipates all
that seemed ominous in his opening with a few jokes and
word games. Even Michaelmas Term's diet becomes the sub-
ject of a bit of grim humor when he compares what he is of-
fered to that which must satisfy his lesser relatives:
"With what a vassal-appetite they gnaw/ On our reversions,
and are proud/ Coldly to taste our meats, which eight re-
turns/ Serve in to us as courses."¹⁴ (IND.5⁴-57) Finally
the Induction ends on a light note with an explanation of
the play's matter and a compliment to the gentles who paid
their sixpences for two hours entertainment:

But, gentlemen, to spread myself open unto you, in
cheaper Terms I salute you . . . . Why call we this
play by such a dear and chargeable title, Michaelmas
Term? Know it consents happily to our purpose, though
perhaps faintly to the interpretation of many, for he
that expects any great quarrels in law to be handled
here will be fondly deceived; this only presents those
familiar accidents which happen'd in town in the cir-
cumference of those six weeks whereof Michaelmas Term
is lord. Sat sapienti; I hope there's no fools i'th'
house. (IND.63-74)

It is a pleasant and seemingly conventional ending to a
clever introduction; but the Induction is more than that.

On the simplest level, it supplies us with the usual
metaphoric associations we have come to expect in comedies
of this kind. The Law is black-gowned, conscienceless, and
finally of the devil's party. It laps up the fruits of
honest toil; it turns the golden harvest of the country
into a silver harvest of its own. At the same time, the
quarrellers who enrich it, who bring their "wealthy
variances" and their "fat brawls" to court, are certainly not babes. They are minor overreachers, whether they are like Quomodo, the city merchant, or Salewood's father, the country gentleman who arrived "three days before the Exchequer gap'd," and they continue willingly in their practices until they are ruined, all in the hope of destroying their neighbors. They come up "thick" at Term time like "hops and harlots"--"for as," says the Boy in the Induction, "the hop well boiled will make a man not stand upon his legs, so the harlot in time will leave a man no legs to stand upon." (16-18) Both those who live by the law and their clients are infertile, or, when fertile, unsavory, and the metaphors applied to them indicate that their preferred world is too.

But there is a larger pattern to the Induction which overwhelms such seemingly threatening language. After a particularly vivid speech describing his activities,

One day our writs, like wild-fowl, fly abroad,  
And then return o'er cities, towns, and hills;  
With clients, like dried straws, between their bills;  
And 'tis no few, birds pick to build their nests,  
Nor no small money that keeps drabs and feasts, (58-62)

Michaelmas Term ends the Induction with the salutation to the gentlemen of the audience quoted above. The closing lines to it, "Sat sapienti; I hope there's no fools i' the house," provide, among other things, a small warning to his patrons on the dangers which surround them, but, on a grander scale, it congratulates them and their code. The
gentleman's code is nothing like the legal one. According to it, the harvest season should be for feasting rather than merely consuming, for reveling rather than grasping. Admittedly, such a code can lead to excess and get those who practice it into difficulties pleasing to the man-eating legalists—that is the small warning—but even so, it is a sound one to live by, and with only a dash of sophistication added, gentlemen will triumph because they deserve to—that is the playwright's larger congratulatory message. The Induction is a particularly apt one because it mirrors the actions and values of its play rather than only introducing it. Michaelmas Term celebrates the healthy appetite, even when it runs to extremes, in much the same way Shakespeare's romantic comedy, Twelfth Night, does.\(^ {16} \) Its scheme, like the scheme of the Induction, guarantees that no matter how threatening metaphors and other characters might be, those who live by the code will thrive by it, while their enemies will be confounded by the very law they created. It is a wonderfully romantic notion, and all that is left, after the Induction has been understood, is to define the code, and to discover which characters live by it and which ones do not. That, of course, is what the play is all about.

The best place to begin is with the subplot since there we are offered pretenders to the code. Andrew Lethe (formerly Andrew Gruel of Scotland\(^ {17} \)) and the Country Wench
have come to town to make their fortunes in the trappings of their betters. Lethe, "one that ne'er wore apparel, but, like ditches,/ 'twas cast before he had it, now shines bright/ in rich embroideries." (I.i.63-65) He is a professional "satin suit," hoping to turn his skills at simpering, pandering, and influence-peddling into a rich marriage which would still allow a little fun on the side. The Country Wench has a similar goal. She was persuaded from her virginity into a life of harlotry all in the hopes of becoming a gentlewoman. Like her male counterpart and sometimes panderer, she too places her faith in clothes. Dick Hellgill, Lethe's man and her first seducer, explains the ways of this new world to her:

Why, Northamptonshire lass, dost dream of virginity now? Remember a loose-bodied gown, wench, and let it go; wires and tires, bents and bums, felts and falls, thou shalt deceive the world, that gentlewomen indeed shall not be known from others. (I.ii.11-15)

After only a few pro forma complaints over her lost maidenhead, she is ravished by her seducer's offers, much to his amusement:

HELLGILL [aside]
How easily soft women are undone.
So farewell wholesome weeds, where treasure pants,
And welcome silks, where lies disease and wants.--
Come, wench, now flow thy fortunes in to bless thee;
I'll bring thee where thou shalt be taught to dress thee.

COUNTRY WENCH.
Oh, as soon as may be! I am in a swoon till I be a gentlewoman; and you know what flesh is man's meat till it be dress'd-- (II.i.50-56)
Lethe and the Country Wench make a gaudy pair, but their beauty is less than skin deep.

Paradoxically enough, the fop and his harlot are more dangerous to the respectable members of the community than they are to the raucous gentles with whom they compete. In fact, except for Lethe's wooing of Rearage's inamorata, they prove, more often than not, diverting rather than troublesome to Easy and his friends. (That this should be so is a mark of Middleton's confidence in the gentleman's code in Michaelmas Term; the subplots in A Trick and A Mad World offer less frivolous characters.) On the other hand, careful members of the middle class like Quomodo and his green-sick daughter find them fascinating, and the rogues' own parents, seemingly poor but honest folk, are so dazzled by their finery that they do not even recognize them for their own children. Lethe and the Country Wench become touchstones: throughout the play characters and their values can be defined according to their responses to these two. It is one of the first examples of Middleton's sustained use of so potentially ironic a device.

Parker, among others, makes much of the long opening speech made by the Country Wench's father after he has followed his runaway to London, "this man-devouring city." It is a dolorous speech,

Where shall I seek her now? Oh, if she knew
The dangers that attend on women's lives,
She would rather lodge under a poor thatch'd roof
Than under carved ceilings. She was my joy,
And all content that I receiv'd from life,
My dear and only daughter. (II.i.1-6)

but to read it only on its surface is to miss the point to
the subplot. The Father continues his lament over his lost
daughter with a description of his own adventures in the
city when he was a young man:

Woe worth th'infected cause that makes me visit
This man-devouring city where I spent
My unshapen youth, to be my age's curse,
And surfeited away my name and state
In swinish riots, that now, being sober,
I do awake a beggar. I do hate her. (II.i.20-25)

The loss of "name and state" which the Father mentions in
this passage has been used to prove that Middleton did not
really mean his play's happy ending, that the Father's past
predicts the gentlemen's future—in fact, that Michaelmas
Term is a kind of danse macabre. Such a reading makes what
was meant to be ironic pathetic.

Lethe and the Country Wench come from humble surround-
ings. His father was a "tooth-drawer," hers a "hay-tosser."
But that is not to say, as the sentimentalists would have
it, that these two, when they came to the city, left behind
the simple virtues which guided and guarded them in the
countryside. Middleton is simply not sentimental about his
characters, no matter where they came from. Lethe, dis-
guised from his searching mother by his new clothes, de-
cides to employ her as his drab:

I may employ her as a private drudge
To pass my letters and secure my lust,
And ne'er be noted mine, to shame my blood,
And drop my staining birth upon my raiment.
(I.i.267-271)

It is a sordid little speech made by a sordid little char-
acter, but his mother does not refuse the commission. She
comes from a world where her son could not have had any
virtues because "his father was too poor a man to bring him
up to any." She is content to learn the fashions of the
city folk.

LETHE.
It goes not by cleanness here, good woman;
if you were fouler, so you were braver, you
might come nearer.

MOTHER GRUEL.
Nay, and that be the fashion, I hope I shall
get it shortly; there's no woman so old but
she may learn, and as an old lady delights in
a young page or monkey, so there are young
courtiers will be hungry upon an old woman,
I warrant you. (I.i.296-301)

The Country Wench's Father is a more difficult case,
but not nearly so difficult a one as the moral critics have
made him out to be. In the first place, despite his state-
ment about his loss of "name and state," he was never a
gentleman in the sense that Easy, Rearage, and Salewood are.
In fact, the Father is in awe of the gentry, even false gen-
try. One of his first complaints against his daughter is
that she lied to him when she claimed to have been "happily
prefer'd to a gentleman's service in London." Later in the
play, when he has been taken into service by her, he in his
disguise and she in hers and neither the wiser, he is awe-
struck by her mere appearance of gentility:

A mistress of a choice beauty! Amongst such imperfect
creatures I ha' not seen a perfecter; I should have
reckoned the fortunes of my daughter amongst the
happiest, had she lighted into such a service.

(III.i.54-57)

(The gentlemen of the main plot are never so deceived; they
recognize the Country Wench for what she is immediately,
and take liberties with her accordingly.) Still later,
when he recognizes her to be only a well-dressed whore, the
Father returns to his dour visions of a decaying world,
"True, corruption may well be generation's first;/ 'We're
bad by nature, but by custom worst.'" (IV.iii.28-29) But
his earlier enthusiasm for all that appeared refined has
compromised him. He is finally a small Malvolio rather
than Milton's pilot of the Galilean lake.

The reversal of roles in the subplot with the parents
unknowingly serving their own dazzling children is a won-
derful device and Middleton makes the most of its comic
potentialities, but it also serves a much more important
function in this most class-conscious of the dramatist's
city plays. There is a repetitive pattern to the lives of
the characters who exist on this social level. Lethe, like
the Country Wench's father before him, spends a short sea-
son in "swinish riots" in the city and then in a grimly hu-
morous scene he must marry his tart, leave his city friends
who now refuse to countenance him, and beg recognition of
his own mother to avoid a public whipping. One can imagine him retiring to the country a disgruntled man railing against the sins of the world just as one can imagine the Country Wench, who seems content enough to marry him, making the best of things like Mother Gruel before her and their living mildly unhappily ever after—or at least until the both of them have to follow their own errant children to the city. Since this is the most romantic of Middleton's city plays, romantic in the Renaissance rather than the modern sense, the hierarchies are strictly observed, most strictly on the lowest level. As a result, the pretentions of Lethe and the pious grumblings of the Father should be seen for what they are—extravagances to delight Middleton's class-assured audience and not ever threats or memento mori.

The mainplot is another matter, but only in degree, not in kind. It belongs to Ephestian Quomodo and his agent, Shortyard (alias John Blastfield), and they are more formidable in their opposition to Easy and Rearage than Lethe with all his clothes and eye-flutterings could ever be. But even Quomodo, the master trickster and one of Middleton's best characters, does not seem very dangerous to the gentlemen and their code when he is compared to later city villains. Unlike Hoard and Lucre in A Trick, he has a dream which goes beyond mere avarice and the spiting of his enemies. The dream undoes him, just as greed undoes Hoard
and Lucre, but, because it is an understandable dream, he is more attractive in his pursuit of it than they are, and he is pleasantly foolish rather than detestable when he fails to achieve it. Perhaps even more important, while Witgood must clash with his enemies on their own terms, Quomodo's dream makes it possible for Easy and Rearage to thrive despite their ignorance of city ways. Though Michaelmas Term is a city play and therefore less delicate in language and motivations than the pastoral models before it, it owes much to them. Wonderful complications (always in keeping with a randy version of the chivalric code) and a decent villain rather than hard-won knowledge determine its outcome.

In his fine section on this play and A Mad World, My Masters, Richard Levin finds a way to unite the various actions through what he calls an "equivalence plot." In both plays he finds the most "significant relationship" to be "the formal analogy that equates their respective subject matters--money and sex." He is quite right in his assessment, but there is a lack of subtlety in so general an application of a good rule to different plays. The grasping characters in A Trick to Catch the Old One are sexually desolate; making money and destroying competitors serves them as a completely satisfying substitute for more fertile activities. The same kind of substitution is not as true in Michaelmas Term and only mildly true in A Mad
World, My Masters. The variations on the sex-money equivalencies in these plays are what make them unique and complementary rather than merely repetitious.

In Michaelmas Term Quomodo is not sterile or even impotent. (Neither is Lethe, the whoremaster and other threat to the gentlemen.) He is simply more interested in other ways of perpetuating himself. We know that he did not serve his wife as well or as often as she might have liked, and, because of that, she finds it easy enough to console herself when he is supposedly dead:

. . . he ne'er us'd me so well as a woman might have been us'd, that's certain; in troth, 't'as been our greatest falling out, sir . . . . wisely did a great widow in this land comfort up another: "Go to, lady," quoth she, "leave blubbery; thou thinkest upon thy husband's good parts when thou sheddest tears; do but remember how often he has lain from thee, and how many naughty slippery turns he has done thee, and thou wilt ne'er weep for him, I warrant thee."

(IV.iii.54-65)

But that is not to say that Quomodo, like his counterparts in A Trick, is totally inactive in this area. After his wife has remarried and enjoyed her new husband, he is disturbed: "I may no more lie with my wife/ In perfect memory."

(V.iii.65-66) Such a speech is hardly in keeping with the cynical wisdom offered by Shortyard and Falselight, Quomodo's men, in their disguises as citizens:

I am of those citizens' minds that say, let our wives make shift for children and they will, they get none of us; and I cannot think but he that has both much wealth and many children, has had more helps coming in than himself.

... (IV.i.35-38)
Most important, there is no reason to doubt that Quomodo is the father of his own children. In fact, that is the very reason why he is willing to forswear the pleasures of the bedchamber for the joys of estate building.

Levin includes in his discussion of the plays a section on Elizabethan beliefs about physiology and psychology, a kind of elaborate footnote to Shakespeare's sonnet on the expense of spirit. Once again, what he offers is a true and valuable account in a general sense.

Another such belief . . . is that we possess an initially undefined but limited store of life energy, so that if we expend too much of it in any one direction we will be too "weak" to perform adequately in other areas. The idea . . . was part of the folk wisdom of the past and was applied most frequently to sexual activity, since it was regarded as the greatest drain on this source of vitality. . . . The asexual acquisitive man is the merchant, too busy amassing wealth to have any energy left over for love, and the contrary traits attach to the gallant, who uses up so much energy on the pleasures of the town that none remains for his business affairs or country estate. The result is a "natural" sexual and financial competition between the two.20

But this act of subliminal substitution, to use Freudian terms for it, takes a different form in each of the three plays under consideration; the distinctiveness belonging to each is as important as the phenomenon itself. In A Trick, we are given an almost classic model according to which the making of money and the making of children are directly opposed to each other. In A Mad World, on the other hand, spending rather than getting drives all of the characters except the gallant, and he finally tricks himself into
marrying his uncle's whore in the name of love rather than possessions. *Michaelmas Term* offers the gentlest version of the equivalence plot. Quomodo's way of doing business simulates a kind of love making, and his goal is to perpetuate the Quomodo line. He must fail, of course, since Easy is the hero, but there is nothing barren about his desires.

If recognizable psychological patterns are to be found in Quomodo's behavior, a less sophisticated impulse than the one Levin suggests would probably serve better. Quomodo wishes to cheat death. Macbeth found, after he had hazarded his soul to gain his crown, that the kingship was of little value to him if he could not pass it and himself on to and through his descendants. All he had gained was a "fruitless crown" and a "barren sceptre . . . / Thence to be wrenched with an unlineal hand." (III.1.61-63) Since *Michaelmas Term* is a comedy rather than a tragedy like *Macbeth*, Quomodo tries to gain his ends through a figurative rape rather than actual murders. Easy is the innocent to be forced to submit, and his lands are the "precious jewel" to be taken. The rape will produce a fertile seat to be enjoyed in Quomodo's name and by his own in perpetuity. He has even had his son trained "to keep by law what was got craftily."

If we see Quomodo in this way, the two problems mentioned most often by critics who deal with him are easily resolved. He despises the gentlemen in the play for the
same reasons Macbeth, the usurping king, hates Banquo, the potential father of kings.

There is none but he
Whose being I do fear; and under him
My genius is rebuked. . . . He chid the sisters
When first they put the name of King upon me,
And bade them speak to him. Then, prophet-like,
They hailed him father to a line of kings. . . .
If't be so,
For Banquo's issue have I filled my mind;
For them the gracious Duncan have I murdered;
Put rancors in the vessel of my peace
Only for them, and mine eternal jewel
Given to the common enemy of man
To make them kings. (III.1.54-70)

Quomodo would prefer Lethe, the parasite, for his daughter to Rearage, the gentleman and landholder. To the one marriage he could contribute everything; to the other only quite forgettable cash. The abiding valuables, the name and the land, would belong to his daughter's husband rather than to his son-in-law. Quomodo's feigned death, which has come in for a good deal of criticism,21 is also understandable, and, I would add, an admirable touch on Middleton's part, when the spring to his character is discovered. The whole point to Quomodo's way of living is to guarantee himself his version of the good death—a death which he will survive through the memories and moveables and fixed estates he has bequeathed his heirs. His motives for testing his expectations in so startling a way are as properly impure and as consistent to his character as anything to be found in the conduct of Jonson's more famous pretender, Volpone.
Quomodo's rape of Easy is the most skillfully constructed and dramatically satisfying action in the play. Moreover, it parallels the ravishing of the Country Wench in the subplot. Dick Hellgill, Lethe's man, seduces the Country Wench with the promise of making her a gentlewoman. Shortyard, Quomodo's agent, seduces Easy, a country gentleman new in his estate and tender in his knowledge, with the promise of making him a city-wise gallant. Even the descriptions applied to the prospective victims are similar: she is "young, beautiful, and plump, a delicate piece of sin"; he is "fresh and free," a "proper springall and a sweet gentleman." Working these seldom-noticed parallels in the way he does indicates a high degree of skill on Middleton's part, but that is only the beginning. The rape in the main plot is even more satisfying for what it is alone. In this action, we are presented with the paradoxical notion that in a world of law only failure can lead to success, and that success, when it results from the destruction of innocents, can only lead to failure. It is not a new idea, of course, but the way in which the dramatist makes it seem logical, indeed, compelling, is unique. The whole movement provides the best example to this date of Middleton's growing skills as an ironist and dramatic craftsman.

The whole thrust to the main plot in Michaelmas Term is directed towards the enjoying of Easy. But, while the subplot is simple, the main plot is complex because having
the gentleman, unlike having the Country Wench, means different things to different characters. As a result, those who would rape him and those who would seduce him for his own good work at cross-purposes. In a world so kindly disposed towards young gentlemen, the more benign approach not only wins, but it brings down confusion upon the heads of the vicious. This continuing play on possible and contradictory sexual approaches unites the play metaphorically and makes its theme obvious.

To Quomodo, the estate's the thing, and Easy is only a kind of sexual object to be tricked, used, and thrown away to get it. He describes the land to be gained in sensual terms, "Oh, that sweet, neat, comely, proper, delicate parcel of land, like a fine gentlewoman i' th' waist, not so great as pretty, pretty" (II.iii.82-84), but not its possessor. Like Witgood before he discovered the real significance to "that little pitte Lecherie" in A Trick, Quomodo has divorced the process from the product, and he must suffer want because of his mistake. We know that he is doomed to failure in his quest for a bit of the green world when we learn of the pimp he has employed to help him deflower Easy. Shortyard, with its obvious reference to a less than adequate male member, is hardly a name to be trusted in such an endeavor, and neither is Master Blastfield, the name Quomodo has him assume for his role as seducer. No matter how brilliantly plotted, Quomodo's rape cannot succeed in
so romantic a play. He has confused the shortest way with the best way, and the shortest way in sexual matters seldom yields the best results.

Thomasine, Quomodo's wife, does not make the same mistake. There are any number of scenes in which she appears and speeches which she makes that could be, and have been, used to prove that she is only a dissatisfied Jacobean matron, unhappy with her husband and bored now that the children are ready to leave. To accept such a description of her would be to misunderstand both her character and her function in the play. She is as close as Middleton, with his sardonic city man's eye, could get to Shakespeare's Olivias, Rosalinds, and Violas. The only important difference between them is that "little Thomasine" is more graphic in her description of what love means to her than the others. When she is first embraced by Easy, under her husband's eye and with his blessing, all, of course, in the name of courtesy, her enthusiasm is barely concealed.

EASY.
I have commission for what I do, lady, from your husband. [Kisses her.]

THOMASINE.
You may have a stronger commission for the next, an't please you, that's from myself.

EASY.
You teach me the best law, lady.

THOMASINE. [aside].
Beshrew my blood, a proper springall and a sweet gentleman. (II.iii.391-404)
Later in the play, after she has wedded and bedded Easy, she is at last contented and her reasons for being so are plainly stated: "What a difference there is in husbands, not only in one thing, but in all." (V.i.51-52) She is a little older, somewhat more married, a good deal more direct than the heroines in the romantic comedies, but otherwise she does not differ from them. Like all the romantic ladies in the plays of the period, she becomes a kind of deus ex machina sent by herself to save floundering gentlemen from their enemies and themselves.

Quomodo's scheme depends for its success on Easy's generous susceptibility and his willingness to accept, because of his self-acknowledged ignorance of city ways, false standards bravely dressed. That alone would offer a brilliant scene: the bright street at the front of the stage filled with bold young men and the dark shop behind it into which they could be led by false members of their own party, there to be tempted and destroyed. Fortunately, by this time Middleton was no longer such a fool as to accept so obviously moral a setting and conclusion. The Elizabethan theater had not only a front stage and a back stage, but also a balcony. In *Michaelmas Term* we are treated to a play whose outcome is determined in the balcony, and that is Thomasine's realm. Even as Quomodo is exulting in Easy's impulsiveness and generosity, proper characteristics for him to work upon, Thomasine, listening
above is falling in love with him because of them. To Quomodo, he is only a fool; to Thomasine, he is "kind," he is "tender," he is to be pitied, and her husband, almost a symbol for the acquisitive ways of the city merchant, looks so much the worse for his "vild" treatment of "so sweet a gentleman." The ending to the play, so much in favor of the gentlemen and so much against the citizens, is easily predictable as soon as Thomasine is introduced. All that Quomodo can do will only be undone by his wife. No matter how important the other characters might be, she represents the spirit of the play. Because of her, and because her way wins out finally, Michaelmas Term is a surprisingly romantic play to have been written by the Middleton we have been taught to expect.

II

Middleton's progression as a comic dramatist can be, and has been, measured according to any number of critical sets of standards. Unfortunately, none of them work very well when they are applied to the three plays dealt with in this chapter. Though each of the plays might be more or less appealing to an individual viewer or reader, they are so very complementary that to separate them and label them on a biographical chart according to the style of their prose and poetry, or the development of their characters, or even the dramatist's skill at carrying out his metaphors,
seems almost a waste of time. But that is not to say that these plays are in no way different from each other or that an order cannot be imposed on them despite our ignorance of their exact dates of composition. Though all three share a common theme, when theme is understood in its largest sense, each play presents it from a slightly different perspective. When these perspectives are examined, the only logical order which could explain the progression of the plays would make Michaelmas Term the first, A Trick to Catch the Old One the middle play, and A Mad World, My Masters the sardonic conclusion to the trilogy.

There are four touchstones which can be relied upon in each of the plays to determine their place in this little epic: the relationship of the subplot to the main plot; the name of the protagonist; the identity of the trickster; and, finally, the position in the play of the character who is married to the whore. In the arrangement that I would advocate, the names of the heroes are Easy, Witgood, and Follywit. As is usual in Middleton's comedies, the names describe the characters and they also help to explain who tricks whom and what the end of trickery is. In Michaelmas Term, Easy tricks no one; he is only tricked. As a result, he is saved by a lady who not only restores his estate to him, but even offers him her love. In A Trick to Catch the Old One, Witgood tricks his tormentors, but only because he has to in order to regain his estate, the virgin he claims
to love, and her ample dowry. In *A Mad World, My Masters*, the tables are turned. Follywit, the poor gallant, is a trickster. Furthermore, though he performs his japes to get badly needed money, the real reasons for his pranks resemble the justifications offered by Hoard and Lucre more closely than they do anything claimed by Witgood.

I was wont yet to pity the simple, and leave 'em some money; 'slid, now I gull 'em without conscience. I go without order, swear without number, gull without mercy, and drink without measure. (I.i.19-22)

There is some exaggeration in this speech, of course, but not enough to let Follywit off. Penitent Brothel says of him:

*Here's a mad-brain o' th' first, whose pranks scorn to have precedents, to be second to any, or walk beneath any mad-cap's inventions; h'as play'd more tricks than the cards can allow a man, and of the last stamp, too; hating imitation, a fellow whose only glory is to be prime of the company. (I.i.82-87)*

Finally, the matter of marrying can be used to determine the proper sequence to these plays. In *Michaelmas Term*, Lethe, a flashy but not very important character, marries the harlot. While Easy loves his temporary wife for a time, he does not really marry anyone. He regains his estate, and that is enough for him. In *A Trick*, Witgood, a somewhat soiled lover, marries his virgin and her money after winning her from his opponents and her greedy friends. His courtesan marries old Hoard, one of the hero's chief opponents and a very important figure in the main action of
the play. In *A Mad World*, it is Follywit, the mad gallant and the hero in the play who marries the prostitute, Mistress Frank Gullman, and, in the name of love not money. The old man in the play keeps the estate and his bachelorhood.

The subplot in *A Mad World* is not like anything Middleton did before it; in fact, it is closer in tone and plotting to Machiavelli's *Mandragola* than to any of the other English plays of the period. The characters are a jealous, elderly husband, Master Harebrain; a mured-up young wife, Mistress Harebrain, pretty, but otherwise indistinguishable from any other young woman; a passionate, but not ordinarily foolish, older lover, Master Penitent Brothel, who has no real reason to love except that he does,

why in others do I check wild passions,
And retain deadly follies in myself? . . .
In myself [I] soothe up adulterous motions,
And such an appetite that I know damns me,
Yet willingly embrace it;  (I.i.90-96)

and Brothel's agent, Mistress Frank Gullman, a fine actress and an expensive prostitute. Frank worms her way into Master Harebrain's house and confidence as a holy woman fit to offer counsel to a potentially giddy young wife. She immediately teaches young Mistress Harebrain to think lewd thoughts about gentlemen not the least bit like her careful husband. (If Middleton was prone to offering messages, an interesting one could be gleaned from this section of the play. It would seem to prove not only that even holy women,
especially pretty ones, cannot be trusted, but that thoughts of any sort are dangerous. As far as we know, Mistress Harebrain never had a lecherous thought in her life, or, for that matter, any thought at all, before her husband introduced the pious lady into her company.) After winning Master Harebrain's confidence, Frank takes sick, and Mistress Harebrain is sent to visit her, a godly exercise to her husband's way of thinking. In a chamber just off the imaginary sick room, she is willingly seduced by Brothel, the counterfeit doctor at Frank's side. Up to this point, it is not that absurd a plot; it is strange, but not beyond the realm of possibility.

The second part of the subplot changes all of that. Brothel, after he has succeeded in enjoying his long-sought quarry, begins to feel pangs of guilt. It is hard to know whether Middleton borrowed most from Marlowe's Doctor Faustus, or Shakespeare's dark lady sonnets, or from any of a number of contemporary penitential works to make this scene; whatever his source, what comes after Brothel's repentant manderings, is only Middleton's. He gives us, right in the middle of scenes which feature the Elizabethan equivalent of bedpans and the creakings of bed springs employed illicitly, a succubus. She has come in the form of Mistress Harebrain to test Brothel's newly-formed resolves, and she is more ravishingly beautiful and more familiar than the real girl ever thought of being. Naturally enough,
Brothel resists her and then makes his way to Harebrain's house to confront the bold sweetheart he first seduced who now has the audacity to trouble him in his repentant mood. It makes a good scene, but not nearly so good a one as the next in which Master Harebrain, the jealous husband, walks in to find his wife and his cuckolder earnestly discussing theology and the purest way of living, she on her knees and he full of himself. Harebrain is ravished by such discourse. After Brothel has convinced his lover that she should be true to her husband and that if she will be, he will be her pure friend forever, Master Harebrain rushes from his hiding place to embrace them both:

HAREBRAIN [comes forward].

And I thine forever and ever. Let me embrace thee, sir, whom
I will love even next unto my soul, and that's my wife;
Two dear rare gems this hour presents me with,
A wife that's modest, and a friend that's right.
Idle suspect and fear, now take your flight.

PENITENT.

A happy inward peace crown both your joys.

HAREBRAIN.

Thanks above utterance to you. (IV.iv.77-83)

Professor Parker was obviously serious when he used this plot to prove that Middleton was secretly a moralist. But he should not have been. It is one of the most elaborate and skillfully contrived pieces of satire to be found in
Middleton's plays. It smacks more of *A Modest Proposal* than of any tract on the holy ways of living and dying.

The subplot is not really connected to the main plot in this play except in spirit. Frank Gullman is Brothel's agent, Sir Bounteous Progress's whore, and, eventually, his grandson Follywit's wife. But otherwise there is no important causal connection between the plots. What is important is that there is a generic coupling between the two parts, and that what begins as a romance in the trilogy with *Michaelmas Term* ends in a satire in both of the plots of *A Mad World*.

Satire, as we have been told by the best writers on the subject, finally turns on itself, or at the very least, the satiric persona becomes at last the fool. That is what happens finally to Gulliver, with his whinnying and stamping and his pride in not being like other men. That is also what happens to Follywit, the master trickster so proud of his abilities to play on other men's weaknesses. The target of his schemes is his old grandsire, Sir Bounteous Progress, a character rather like Chaucer's Franklin. The old man's chief delight is to keep "a house like his name, bounteous, open for all comers" and to pleasure his noble visitors with "his complement, variety of entertainment, together with the largeness of his kitchen, longitude of his buttery, and fecundity of his larder." (I.i.60-64)

In short, he is, to Follywit's way of thinking, a rich old
bumpkin. Three times his artfully disguised grandson descends upon him to try his gullibility and to rob him. Three times, because of his open nature, Sir Bounteous plays the fool. Then the roles are reversed.

Follywit, the superior intellect, captain of his company of rogues, and satirist of all that is foolish and sentimental, falls in love with a good woman. When he comes to pay his court, she runs away; when he woos her she will not listen because "she is afraid of a man."

'Sfoot, this is strange. I've seldom seen a wench stand upon stricter points; life, she will not endure to be courted. . . . 'Twere a mad part in me now to turn over; if ever there were any hope on't, 'tis at this instant. Shall I be madder now than ever I have been? I'm in the way, 'faith. Man's never at high height of madness full Until he love and prove a woman's gull. I do protest in earnest I ne'er knew At which end to begin to affect a woman Till this bewitching minute; I ne'er saw Face worth my object till mine eye met hers. I should laugh and I were caught, 'faith; I'll see her again, that's certain, whate'er comes on't.

(IV.v.5-20)

Naturally enough, Follywit marries so extraordinary a person, and, as a sign of his reclamation, presents her to his grandfather for his approval: "that you may be seriously assured of my hereafter stableness of life, I have took. . . . a wife. . . . both a gentlewoman and a virgin." (V.ii.242-248) Sir Bounteous is delighted by his grandson's virtuous progress: "Ah, ha, ha, ha! This makes amends for all." (V.ii.251) Follywit's new wife is his grandfather's old harlot.
Even the metaphors common to this type of play are given a satiric twist in *A Mad World* which forces them back on the ironical speaker himself. Sir Bounteous is described in the same kind of sterile language usually applied to Quomodo, Hoard, and Lucre. In fact, he indulges in such barren stuff at his own expense:

SIR BOUNTEOUS.
Silken rest, harmonious slumbers, and venereal dreams to your lordship.

FOLLYWIT.
The like to kind, Sir Bounteous.

SIR BOUNTEOUS.
Fie, not to me, my lord. I'm old past dreaming of such vanities. (II.ii.9-13)

But such disclaimers do not make it so; despite the witty comments made by his grandson and his courtesan on his sexual prowess, Sir Bounteous is not sterile as Hoard and Lucre are or even disinterested in such matters as Quomodo is.

Frank Gullman may laugh when the old knight suspects that the cause of her feigned illness is his potency, but Follywit does not, and, on this occasion, he is in the right. When he learns that his grandfather has a woman in town, he is sufficiently enough alarmed to try to discredit her. In his second disguise, he robs his grandfather in her person to prevent what he fears, his own disinherition because of her.

FOLLYWIT.
Is it for certain, lieutenant, that my grandsire keeps an uncertain creature, a quean?
MAWWORM.
Ay, that's too true, sir.

FOLLYWIT.
So much the more preposterous for me; I shall hope shorter by that trick: she carries away the thirds at least. 'Twill prove entail'd land, I am afraid, when all's done. (III.iii.30-35)

It is not likely that the heirs to the old men in the other two plays would fear such a rival.

Furthermore, unlike his predecessors, Sir Bounteous is a part of the green and feasting world of the country rather than the grasping world of the city. Therefore, sexually insulting metaphors used to describe him do not have the same bite that they do when applied to the city elders. At the end of the play, he is allowed to laugh when he is presented with a new granddaughter-in-law and Follywit, like Lethe and Hoard before him, must make the best of things, in this case not so destructive a choice.

SIR BOUNTEOUS.
The best is, sirrah, you pledge none but me; And since I drink the top, take her; and hark, I spicce the bottom with a thousand mark.

FOLLYWIT.
By my troth, she is as good a cup of nectar as any bachelor needs to sip at. Tut, give me gold, it makes amends for vice; Maids without coin are caudles without spice. (V.ii.262-268)

Even the festive party at the end of the play is held at the house of Sir Bounteous, and by his choice rather than at his sufferance. The final word in this play belongs to
the generous old man of the country instead of to the young man of the town:

Come, gentlemen, to th' feast, let not time waste;  
We have pleas'd our ear, now let us please our taste.  
Who lives by cunning, mark it, his fate's cast;  
When he has gull'd all, then is himself the last.  
(V.ii.269-272)

We have come full circle.

III

When Middleton wrote these plays, Shakespeare was writing his "problem" comedies and the first of his major tragedies. Jonson had given up his "comicall satyres" in the face of whatever heat the war of the theaters generated, had failed as a popular tragic dramatist with Sejanus, and was busily working in his own desultory fashion on Volpone, the first of his major comedies to deal with actual city problems. Marston had just given his audience The Malcontent, a truly cynical version of what the brave new Jacobean world was like and Heywood had supplied a sentimental alternative with A Woman Killed With Kindness. Chapman, by then an elder statesman more famed for his scholarly abilities than his dramaturgy, offered Bussy D'Ambois, a magnificent failure because it tried to fit an Elizabethan plot to a Jacobean setting. Of all the dramatists mentioned above, only Middleton (and this, admittedly, is a presumptuous statement) was not at war with the settings which
surrounded him nor at peace with grand answers which would satisfy at least someone and solve nothing.

Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* serves best, because it is so very brilliant and yet dissatisfying, as an example of what the other dramatists were doing in the face of the general intellectual malaise so often noted by scholars of the early Jacobean period. Shakespeare gives us Elbow, Lucio, Claudio, and Angelo as sinners of various ranks and a city setting which is only a little less real than those created by Middleton. But the means he employs to gain his resolution is from a different and an earlier time. To put things right, we are given Duke Vincentio, almost a Christ come again, dispensing justice and mercy with so even a hand that there can be no doubt that the Christian God is behind the whole scheme.

Middleton is never so sure of himself or of God. For all of his reputation as a cynic, he is tolerant in a way that only a realist with a penchant for irony can be. He is not, finally, Harbage's immoral pleaser, or Knights' amoral money maker, or Parker's tormented moralist. He is not even Eliot's faceless observer and exquisite craftsman. In Middleton's comic world, there are a few virtues and a great many sins. The virtuous characters in Middleton's comedies need to be taught some self-interest so that they can survive, but the rewards they receive, always a place in the country, come as a result of their own best quality--
their generosity. The sinners in Middleton's comedies fail because they lack such an inclination. But the sinners can always be forgiven, because sin itself is always self-defeating and finally not very serious. Indeed, in the dramatist's eyes, we are all sinners and evil in his comic world is ludicrous rather than threatening. The dark world of the city is, at last, only a vanity fair, traversable for those who can add a little learning to their natural gifts.

Middleton is not moral, immoral, or amoral. There is a system of ethics which he approves of, but there is nothing very rigid about it. In these plays he set the tone for the kind of world view which would dominate the comic stage for the next ten years. The period in which Jacobean city comedies flourished finally ended with his own best comedy, *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* and with Jonson's last great play, *Bartholomew Fair*. Some of the last lines in the latter play explain as well as any passage in any of the plays what the genre was all about. Quarlous, a young gallant, is called upon by himself to advise the chief legalist in *Bartholomew Fair*, a Justice of the Peace named Adam Overdo, on a new course of life after the judge's own wife has embarrassed him by falling down drunk while masked and dressed in the green sleeves of a prostitute, just as he was pontifically haranguing the other city folk on their less than spotless lives.
Quar. . . . . get your wife out o' the air, it will make her worse else; and remember you are but Adam, flesh and blood! You have your frailty, forget your other name of Overdo, and invite us all to supper.

Adam Overdo can only accept the gay young man's suggestions, and forget his former overly-moral position:

I invite you home with me to my house, to supper: I will have none fear to go along, for my intents are ad correctionem, non ad destructionem; ad aedificandum, non ad diruendum: so lead on. (V.vi.98-116)

It is a fitting epitaph for drama of this sort.
NOTES

CHAPTER FOUR


3 Such an attitude comes, quite obviously, from the pernicious habit of one century's critics applying their sets of standards to an earlier century's artists. For a fine example of such a misinterpretation, see Jackson's Vision and Judgment in Ben Jonson's Drama.

4 Parker, "Middleton's Experiments . . .," p. 179.


6 Parker, "Middleton's Experiments . . .," p. 199.

7 Parker, "Middleton's Experiments . . .," p. 185.

8 On Middleton's emblematic passages, see especially Schoenbaum, Middleton's Tragedies.

9 Every commentator who has spent some time with Middleton spends a good deal of time discussing his skills as an ironist. For the best appreciation, see Eliot, "Thomas Middleton" in Elizabethan Dramatists.

10 See Barker, pp. 164-165.

The four terms were Michaelmas (fall), Hilary (winter), Easter (early spring), and Triniti-ity (late spring). Since Michaelmas Term was the first of the legal year, and there-fore the busiest, Middleton calls it the father of the others. See Sampson, Thomas Middlton.

Unlike the other Terms, there were eight days during Michaelmas Term on which writs a s mandates had to be re-turned to court. See Sampson, Thomas Middlton.

Sat sapienti is the short form for dictum sapienti sit est—a word to the wise is sufficient—a proverb which can be found in Plautus' Persa (1. 729) and Terence's Phormio (1. 541). See Levin, Michaelmas Term, p. 6.


Parker, "Middleton's Experiments . . .," p. 185.

Levin, The Multiple Plot in English Renaissance Drama, p. 168.


See especially, Levin, Michaelmas Term, p. xviii.


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