Plotting Early Modern London

Dieter Mehl,
Angela Stock and
Anne-Julia Zwierlein

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With the publication of Brian Gibbons's *Jacobean City Comedy* thirty-five years ago, the urban satires by Ben Jonson, John Marston and Thomas Middleton attained their 'official status as a Renaissance subgenre' that was distinct by its farcical humour and ironic tone from 'citizen comedy' or 'London drama' more generally. This retrospective genre-building has proved immensely fruitful in the study of early modern English drama; and although city comedies may not yet rival Shakespeare's plays in the amount of editorial work and critical acclaim they receive, both the theatrical contexts and the dramatic complexity of the genre itself and its interrelations with Shakespearean drama justly command an increasing deal of attention.

Looking at a broad range of plays written between the 1590s and the 1630s – masterpieces of the genre like *Eastward Ho*, *A Trick to Catch the Old One*, *The Dutch Courtesan* and *The Devil is an Ass*, blends of romance and satire like *The Shoemaker's Holiday* and *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, and bourgeois oddities in the Shakespearean manner like *The London Prodigal* – the twelve essays in this volume re-examine city comedy in the light of recently foregrounded historical contexts such as early modern capitalism, urban culture, the Protestant Reformation, and playhouse politics. Further, they explore the interrelations between city comedy and Shakespearean comedy both from the perspective of author rivalry and in terms of modern adaptations: the twenty-first-century concept of 'popular Shakespeare' (above all in the movie sector) seems to realign the comparatively time- and placeless Shakespearean drama with the gritty, noisy and bustling urban scene that has been city comedy's traditional preserve.

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Plotting Early Modern London

New Essays on Jacobean City Comedy

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Preface

The essays in this volume, all by friends, colleagues and former students of Brian Gibbons, explore further the concept of Jacobean city comedy, brilliantly established and described in Gibbons's seminal study *Jacobean City Comedy. A Study of Satiric Plays by Jonson, Marston and Middleton* (1968, rev. ed. 1980). The book has been most influential, initiating a new field of enquiry and stimulating lively critical debates. All the contributors to this collection share a sense of indebtedness to the scholar who first drew attention to a most distinctive and interesting dramatic genre which has since repeatedly proved its enduring vitality on the stage. This volume is therefore intended as a token of respect and admiration for Brian Gibbons as a colleague, teacher and friend and to honour him for his contributions to the study and appreciation of early modern drama.

We would like to thank the following friends and scholars without whom this volume would not have been possible: first of all Christa Jansohn at Bamberg, who came up with the theme for this project, played a decisive role during the initial organizing stages and has supported us throughout; Hermann Josef Real at Münster for supporting this project from its early stages; and André Schüller-Zwierlein and Christian Krug for their intelligent proof-reading of parts of this volume. We are also very grateful to Erika Gaffney at Ashgate, who was very supportive even under the straightened circumstances in which publishers find themselves these days, to Anne Keirby and Emma Williams at Ashgate for their meticulous proof-reading, and to the anonymous reader for Ashgate for his or her many helpful and perceptive notes and their very prompt delivery. Last but not least, our sincere thanks go to our contributors for their wonderful co-operation and for keeping to a rather tight schedule with good grace.

August 2003

Dieter Mehl (Bonn)
Angela Stock (Münster)
Anne-Julia Zwierlein (Bamberg)

General Editor's Preface

Helen Ostovich, McMaster University

Performance assumes a string of creative, analytical, and collaborative acts that, in defiance of theatrical ephemerality, live on through records, manuscripts, and printed books. The monographs and essay collections in this series offer original research which addresses theatre histories and performance histories in the context of the sixteenth and seventeenth century life. Of especial interest are studies in which women's activities are a central feature of discussion as financial or technical supporters (patrons, musicians, dancers, seamstresses, wig-makers, or 'gatherers'), if not authors or performers per se. Welcome too are critiques of early modern drama that not only take into account the production values of the plays, but also speculate on how intellectual advances or popular culture affect the theatre.

The series logo, selected by my colleague Mary V. Silcox, derives from Thomas Combe's duodecimo volume, The Theater of Fine Devices (London, 1592), Emblem VI, sig. B. The emblem of four masks has a verse which makes claims for the increasing complexity of early modern experience, a complexity that makes interpretation difficult. Hence the corresponding perhaps uneasy rise in sophistication:

> Masks will be more hereafter in request,
> And grow more deare than they did heretofore.

No longer simply signs of performance 'in play and iest', the mask has become the 'double face' worn 'in earnest' even by 'the best' of people, in order to manipulate or profit from the world around them. The books stamped with this design attempt to understand the complications of performance produced on stage and interpreted by the audience, whose experiences outside the theatre may reflect the emblem's argument:

> Most men do vse some colour'd shift
> For to conceal their craftie drift.

Centuries after their first presentations, the possible performance choices and meanings they engender still stir the imaginations of actors, audiences, and readers of early plays. The products of scholarly creativity in this series, I hope, will also stir imaginations to new ways of thinking about performance.

To Brian Gibbons,
Colleague, teacher, friend

Introduction

'Our scene is London ...'

Angela Stock and Anne-Julia Zwierlein

> '[...] they be gallants that are delighted with the pretty contentments of this town, as with love of pleasures, I will not say whorings; or gay clothes, I dare not say wastings of their estates; or merry society, I dare not say bitterness and jests to get the name of a wit [...]; or to see plays, which must not be named idleness'. (Henry Percy, 9th Earl of Northumberland, to his son, 1609)

'This is Jacobean comedy at its documentary best: a salty, vivid report on the eternal clash between the puritan ethic and spendthrift snobbery. [...] The real interest lies in the vindictive triumph of the bourgeoisie over their class superiors and get-rich-quick dreamers', ' – savvy, quick-witted, surprisingly warm-hearted and with a plot driven by those most reliable twin-motors, sex and money.'[1] The current popularity of Jacobean city comedies in the British theatre is not surprising. In a cultural climate in which situation comedies about young urban professionals achieve top television ratings and Shakespearean favourites are adapted to the urban world, a taste for modern-sounding classics meets a taste for authentic-looking theatrical venues. The revival of non-Shakespearean 'Jacobethan' plays has been particularly successful in two Elizabethan-style playhouses, the Swan at Stratford-upon-Avon and Shakespeare's Globe in London. The Globe offered Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* and *A Mad World, My Masters* in their first and second seasons in 1997 and 1998, followed soon afterwards by *The Honest Whore*, and was widely praised for keeping this repertoire alive.[2] Their Education Centre has recently announced a new initiative for the coming seasons called 'Read not dead', in which professional actors will stage readings of over one hundred rarely performed Renaissance plays, among them London comedies ranging from *Englishmen For My Money*, *Westward Ho* and *Ram Alley* to *If You Know Not Me, You Know Nobody* and *Anything for a Quiet Life*. At Stratford-upon-Avon, where the Royal Shakespeare Company is currently struggling to survive and at the same time to refurbish itself, the non-Shakespearean productions in the Swan are almost invariably more acclaimed than the Shakespearean ones in

[1] Michael Billington, *The Guardian*, 26 April 2002. – Charles Spencer, *The Daily Telegraph*, 3 June 2002.

[2] See Michael Coveney, *Daily Mail*, 14 August 1998.

the main house, and *Eastward Ho* took pride of place in the 2002 season.[3] The writers of Jacobean city comedies may not yet rival Shakespeare in the amount of editorial work and critical acclaim they receive; but both the theatrical contexts and the dramatic complexity of the genre itself and its interrelations with Shakespearean drama justly command an increasing deal of attention.[4]

With the publication of Brian Gibbons's *Jacobean City Comedy* in 1968 these plays, in the words of Douglas Bruster, attained their 'official status as a Renaissance subgenre', distinct by their farcical humour and ironic tone from 'citizen comedy' or 'London drama' more generally.[5] This retrospective genre-building has proved immensely fruitful in the study of early modern English drama over the last thirty-five years. It has allowed critics to assess in far greater detail the scope and variety of generic interrelations, the making of playhouse clienteles and the thrust of playwright polemics – even to the extent of detecting clear-cut dramatic boundaries and confirmed theatrical enmities where it would be better to speak of constantly changing formations of dramatic competition, consumer tastes and commercial pressures.

The present volume, briefly in this introduction and more specifically in the individual sections, takes up some of city comedy's traditional characteristics in order to re-examine them in the light of recently foregrounded historical contexts such as early modern capitalism, urban culture, the Protestant Reformation and playhouse politics. Further, it discusses the interrelations between city comedy and Shakespearean comedy both in terms of author rivalry and from the perspective of modern adaptations: the twenty-first-century concept of 'popular Shakespeare' (above all in the movie sector) seems to realign the comparatively time- and placeless Shakespearean drama with the gritty, noisy and bustling urban scene that has been city comedy's traditional preserve.

According to Gibbons, city comedies were characterized by 'their critical and satirical design, their urban settings, [and] their exclusion of material

[3] It may be significant that after this success, the RSC's 2003 season included *Measure for Measure* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, two Shakespearean incursions into city/citizen comedy.

[4] Editorial activity in this field is particularly lively at the moment. In 2001 Oxford University Press published a volume containing four city comedies (*Every Man In His Humour*, *The Shoemaker's Holiday*, *Eastward Ho* and *The Roaring Girl*). The Oxford edition of the complete works of Thomas Middleton was announced for 2003. Cambridge University Press have announced the publication of the first complete edition of Ben Jonson's works since the Oxford edition by Herford and Simpson (1925 to 1952); this new edition will appear in 2005 in both a printed and an electronic version. The city comedies in the New Mermaid series are constantly being revised, most recently *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, *Volpone* and *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (all 2002).

[5] Douglas Bruster, *Drama and the Market in the Age of Shakespeare* (Cambridge, 1992), 31. Bruster concisely discusses the problematic distinction between 'city' and 'citizen' comedy and the London reverberations of plays set in foreign cities: 'When, for example, is Florence Florence, and when is Florence London?' (33).

appropriate to romance, fairy-tale, sentimental legend or patriotic chronicle'.[6] This focus on the playgoers' immediate, everyday reality was without precedent on the English stage. All early modern stage plays about contemporary London were 'realistic' in that they sought to transform 'typical elements of city life into significant patterns, expressing consciously satirical criticism but also suggesting deeper sources of conflict and change'[7] – but not all of them were dominated by a scornful, at least ostensibly pessimistic view of social relations in the modern urban world. 'Sordid realism', as we may term it, has been regarded as the defining mode and spirit of the 'canonical' city comedies by Ben Jonson, John Marston and Thomas Middleton, and thus the 'romantic historical comedies' by Thomas Dekker, Thomas Heywood and others have been discussed as a genre apart. Yet all forms of London drama set the dramatic and ideological framework within which city comedy worked and achieved its effects in the playhouses.

The essays in this volume look at a broad range of play-texts written between the 1590s and the 1630s and branch out to include city comedy's history of reception and adaptation. While Gibbons dealt with plays written between 1597 (*The Isle of Dogs*) and 1616 (*The Devil is an Ass*), Theodore Leinwand later narrowed the period to between 1603 and 1613 in order to focus on 'intrigues and romances in which a particular configuration of the dramatic triangle formed by citizens, gallants, and wives, whores, widows, and maids is plotted'.[8] Susan Wells, exploring city comedy as an attempt to reconcile the traditional, festive version of the market with that of early modern capitalism, allows plays from 1605 to 1630.[9] Wendy Griswold, who has traced the subsequent stage history of city comedies written between 1598 and 1621, points out that their wide appeal consisted in their 'topicality', 'the archetypal appeal of the trickster' and the representation of 'recurrent concerns about social mobility and social order'.[10] To narrow the genre of satiric city comedy to the long decade after the turn of the century means, in a sense, to limit its dramatic influence. Its masterpieces – *Eastward Ho* (1605), *The Alchemist* (1610), *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1613), *Bartholomew Fair* (1614) and *The Devil is an Ass* (1616)[11] – were written within a dozen years at the beginning of the new king's reign, but the topics of sex and money, the urban setting and the wry, even cynical tone inherited from Juvenal never ceased to entertain playgoers or furnish playwrights with material. Fast-paced, witty and down-to-earth – peopled with easily recognizable urban types for whom social intercourse invariably means role-playing and intrigue; who spend money, words

[6] Brian Gibbons, *Jacobean City Comedy. A Study of Satiric Plays by Jonson, Marston and Middleton*, 2nd ed. (London, 1980), 11.

[7] *Ibidem*, 4.

[8] Theodore K. Leinwand, *The City Staged: Jacobean Comedy, 1603-1613* (Madison, 1986), 7.

[9] Susan Wells, 'Jacobean City Comedy and the Ideology of the City', *English Literary History* 48 (1981), 37-60.

[10] Wendy Griswold, *Renaissance Revivals: City Comedy and Revenge Tragedy in the London Theatre, 1576-1980* (Chicago, 1986), 34.

[11] Dates of first performance are taken from Alfred Harbage, Samuel Schoenbaum and Sylvia Stoler Wagonheim, *Annals of English Drama, 975-1700*, 3rd ed. (London, 1989).

and even body fluids in a frantic attempt to rise in the world; who speak like ordinary people (and often like ordinary people trying to speak 'posh'); who engage in fraud and adultery and often overreach themselves; who seek to bully their children into advantageous marriages or to outmanoeuvre their parents so that they can marry for love; who spurn their inferiors and despise their betters even while they scramble for prestige and status – city comedy seems forever topical.

All contributors to this collection bear in mind the fact that 'plotting London', as our title indicates, was both the subject and the objective of these plays. All the world's a market, they seem to comment on a received commonplace of their time, and all the men and women merely schemers who devise plots to gain advantage over others. To assert some sort of control, some sort of mastery over this amorphous urban marketplace, it had to be surveyed – literally, topographically, but also figuratively, in narrative representation. No medium was better suited to the task of 'plotting London' than the new genre of city comedy.[12]

Early Modern London

By English standards, early modern London was a unique urban phenomenon. Its citizens quite understandably showed 'a new interest in describing their surroundings, [and] unprecedented attempts to analyse their society.'[13] Many titles were attached to London and many images found in an attempt to express the metropolitan experience: it was Troynovant, the New Jerusalem, the epitome or breviary of all Britain; it was a virgin, a mother, a fickle mistress, a monster; it was a beehive or Babylon, a jewel, a sea, a wood, a sprawling palace, and again and again a stage, a theatre. While its increase in wealth and economic power was celebrated throughout the epoch, the dangers to traditional moral values and decorum posed by the vast conglomeration were also clearly perceived. Less and less, even in official accounts, did London live up to its biblical and classical potential of 'a visionary embodiment of ideal community'; more and more it was seen as 'a predatory trap'.[14] Donald Lupton, writing in 1632, was full of ambivalent admiration for Britain's capital city:

> She is grown so great that I am almost afraid to meddle with her. She's certainly a great world, there are so many little worlds in her. She is the great beehive of Christendom, I am sure of England. She swarms four times in a year, with people of all ages, natures, sexes, callings; decay of trade, the pestilence, and a long vacation

[12] Incidentally, Henry S. Turner in his article 'Plotting Early Modernity' links early modern topography with poetry and surveyors with playwrights, 'makers of plots', *The Culture of Capital: Property, Cities and Knowledge in Early Modern England*, ed. Henry S. Turner (New York, 2002), 85-127, esp. 119-20.

[13] Lawrence Manley, ed., *London in the Age of Shakespeare: An Anthology* (University Park, 1986), 75.

[14] Gail Kern Paster, *The Idea of the City in the Age of Shakespeare* (Athens, Georgia, 1985), 3. See especially her chapter 'Parasites and Sub-parasites: The City as Predator in Jonson and Middleton', 150-77.

> are three scarecrows to her. [...] She seems to be a glutton, for she desires always to be full. [...] She may be said to be always with child, for she grows greater every day than other [...]. She is the countryman's labyrinth; he can find many things in it, but many times loseth himself.[15]

With some 200,000 inhabitants London was, at the turn of the sixteenth century, one of Europe's largest cities, smaller only than Paris and Naples. The pace of its growth indeed had something 'enormous', something monstrous, for it had doubled its population in a mere thirty years and would again double it to 400,000 within the next half century.[16] Lupton's sense of 'losing oneself' in the anonymity of the crowd and the labyrinth of streets is a genuinely modern, metropolitan experience that chimes in with Jean-Christophe Agnew's influential definition of the modern form of capitalism as a 'placeless market'.[17] Economic exchange had become anonymous and complex. The term 'market' denoted no longer only the 'experienced physical and social space' of, say, a shoemaker's shop or Cheapside or the Royal Exchange, but also 'the acts of both buying and selling, regardless of locale, and [...] the price or exchange value of goods and services.'[18] Money, Mathew Martin sums up, 'took on a life of its own.'[19] It is no coincidence that William Haughton's *Englishmen For My Money* (1598), one of the earliest comedies set in contemporary London, features a long and bustling scene at the Royal Exchange as part of a farcical plot about foreigners getting lost in the labyrinthine streets. The city was becoming impenetrable in more senses than one.

London's pre-eminence as the centre of trade and the seat of all major institutions of state, law and commerce had already been established by the thirteenth century and thus should not be overemphasized as an early modern development. In some sense we might even have to question the extent to which Jacobean city comedy was a specific response to Jacobean London. After all, there was a strong medieval tradition of 'anti-acquisitive' invective that had recently been fuelled by popular Protestant propaganda; and the merchant had always figured prominently in moral tales chastizing avarice and envy. Gibbons's study serves as a reminder that native and classical traditions of satire shaped stage satires as much as contemporary socio-economic conditions and ideological pressures did, and Gail Kern Paster has stressed the influence of classical and early Christian religious and political philosophy on early modern 'ideas of the city'.[20] But there were at least two important factors distinguishing the English from the

[15] Donald Lupton, *London and the Countrey Carbonadoed* (London, 1632), B-B2v.

[16] Statistical figures are taken from Roger Finlay and Beatrice Shearer, 'Population Growth and Suburban Expansion', *London 1500-1700: The Making of the Metropolis*, ed. A. L. Beier and Roger Finlay (London, 1986), 37-59.

[17] Jean-Christophe Agnew, *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theatre in Anglo-American Thought, 1550-1750* (Cambridge, 1986), 56 and *passim*.

[18] *Ibidem*, 41.

[19] Mathew R. Martin, *Between Theatre and Philosophy: Skepticism in the Major City Comedies of Ben Jonson and Thomas Middleton* (Newark, 2001), 19.

[20] Paster, *The Idea of the City*, see the chapters on Augustine's *City of God* and on Horace, Juvenal, and Plautus, 9-32 and 33-57.

continental situation. Firstly, overseas trading ventures gave a visible and unprecedented boost to London's import and export trade (and fostered fantasies at all levels of society about the cornucopia of goods shipped into the Thames estuary), and the institution of Gresham's Burse, built in 1568 and named 'The Royal Exchange' by Elizabeth in 1570, was a 'visible – and ambiguous – symbol of capitalism's developing power.'[21] Secondly, the push for increased productivity in the agricultural sector 'favored large tenant farmers and limited, contractual rather than customary land-holding agreements'.[22] This development is of preeminent importance for the changing demographic make-up of early modern London (mirrored in some of city comedies' most recurrent social constellations), as it caused rural displacement on a large scale and smaller tenants started to migrate to the city in search of work.

None of the comparable European cities at this time experienced such a massive influx of immigrants from their hinterlands. When Gertrude Touchstone in *Eastward Ho*, upwardly mobile daughter of a goldsmith and recently married to a 'thirty-pound knight', insists that she was born and brought up *in* London while her servant Sindefy was only brought up *to* London by a no-good apprentice, she is making a distinction that was almost as flimsy a fiction as her husband's castle in the country. By the end of the queen's reign, the majority of people living in the greater London area had not been born there.[23] The vast majority of immigrants were young males, most of them servants and apprentices who were 'bound' to authority by the terms of their employment. While rogue literature like street ballads, broadsheets and coney-catching pamphlets 'projected the impression of a mobile and predatory subculture' with its own rituals and arcane language in subversive opposition to the new forms of organized economy,[24] 'vagrants of the period were in fact mostly solitary and anonymous wanderers, cut off from any stable community, family, or lasting affective ties.'[25] London's merchant-magistrates knew well enough that street violence and riots, which became more frequent as the population expanded, were in fact led by servants and apprentices who were part of a household or were legally bound to a master; but they fuelled people's fears of vagrant hordes of 'masterless men'.[26] Quicksilver, the prodigal gentleman-apprentice in *Eastward Ho*, personifies the free-floating, hovering

[21] Martin, *Between Theatre and Philosophy*, 19.

[22] Derek Keene, 'Material London in Time and Space', *Material London, ca. 1600*, ed. Lena Cowen Orlin (Philadelphia, 2000), 55-74, 57.

[23] George Chapman, Ben Jonson and John Marston, *Eastward Ho*, ed. C. G. Petter, The New Mermaids (London, 1973), 5.1.19-20. – It is estimated that of the English population of some three-and-a-half million, one in six had lived in London at some time of their lives, and one in twenty worked and lived there on a more or less permanent basis, see Finlay and Shearer, 'Population Growth and Suburban Expansion'.

[24] Agnew, *Worlds Apart*, 66.

[25] Patricia Fumerton, 'London's Vagrant Economy: Making Space for "Low" Subjectivity', *Material London ca. 1600*, ed. Lena Cowen Orlin (Philadelphia, 2000), 206-25, 209.

[26] See Mark Thornton Burnett, 'Apprentice Literature and the "Crisis" of the 1590s', *Yearbook of English Studies* 21 (1991), 27-38.

potential of early modern urban society, in which chance, daring and canny determination could propel a man to the height of wealth and power or sink him into shame and penury – in Quicksilver's case the muddy Thames and the debtors' prison. Young gentlemen, be they apprentices, law students, idle gallants or masterless vagrants, are the main mischief-makers in Jacobean city comedy; thus contemporary social conditions had transformed the comic *dramatis personae* familiar from Roman New Comedy: 'The Roman intriguer was a slave or parasite; the [Jacobean] city comedy gallant combines the intriguer with the youth from a good family (*adolescentus*), while the city comedy rogue is usually a criminal, not a servant.'[27]

An increasing number of immigrants – 'foreigners' from the English shires and 'strangers' from abroad – were not able or did not care to join the still powerful craft and trade guilds, so their business activities were unsupervised and unregulated. This also meant that they did not become London citizens in the legal sense: in order to become 'free' of the city, one had to serve an apprenticeship in one of the guilds and qualify as a member. However, by the turn of the century a mere 30-40 per cent of all householders in the greater London area still possessed this legal status.[28] The middling merchants and master artisans who are ridiculed in city comedy for upholding an outdated code of honour were, historically speaking, a beleaguered minority who, in the terms of Eric Hobsbawm, had to 'invent traditions' in order to buttress their political and social standing by appealing to people's respect for ancient rights and customs.[29]

Although it is true to say that 'within the old city itself, there was no social segregation into rigidly divided areas of rich and poor quarters',[30] money and fashion were crowding along the river towards Westminster. The medieval episcopal palaces along the Strand had been appropriated by Henry VIII and been given away by the king to his noblemen in return for loyalty; later these buildings were broken up into high-class lodgings for 'termers' (who came to London only while the law courts were in session) or rented out as shops. The Strand had begun to rival Cheapside as London's commercial centre. At the end of *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1613) the Allwits – hitherto supported by Mrs Allwit's gentry lover – have to find a new source of income and decide to set up an up-market boarding-house:

> MISTRESS ALLWIT Let's let out lodgings then,
> And take a house in the Strand.
> ALLWIT In troth a match wench:
> We are simply stocked with cloth of tissue cushions,

[27] Griswold, *Renaissance Revivals*, 41.

[28] Ian A. Archer, 'Politics and Government, 1540-1700', *Cambridge Urban History of Britain. Vol. 2: 1540-1840*, ed. Peter Clark (Cambridge, 2000), 235-62, 245. See also Steve Rappaport, *Worlds Within Worlds: Structures of Life in Sixteenth-Century London* (Cambridge, 1989).

[29] Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, ed., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983).

[30] John Schofield, 'Topography and Buildings of London', *Material London, ca. 1600*, ed. Lena Cowen Orlin, 296-321, 310.

> To furnish out bay windows: push, what not that's quaint
> And costly, from the top to the bottom. (5.2.169-73)

Conflicts about precedence, rank and boundaries were carried out on all levels of social life, and claims were staked symbolically as well as quite literally. Here again, recent historical and sociological research has deepened our understanding of the often serious social implications of the comedies' farcical plots. Lena Cowen Orlin has shown how fiercely contested every inch of urban ground was during the mid- to late sixteenth century, and how meticulous the legal processes involved in 'holding one's ground' against neighbourly encroachments.[31]

Without an effective police force or an infrastructure to monitor the tumultuous 'skirts' of the city as well as the twenty-six wards, London had to maintain its social and political equilibrium of its own accord, consensually. Yet contemporaries often despaired of controlling this urban organism that seemed to be bursting with irresistible vitality, 'as it were disdaining bondage'.[32] As John Twyning has argued, by the early seventeenth century 'London had not only outgrown its traditional guild structures but also outstripped or over-stressed nearly all its institutional, customary, legal, and administrative practices. Because of this it was at once in a state of flux and in the continuous process of reinventing itself.'[33] Inevitably this process of reinvention and the fictions it brought forth were characterized by uncertainty and contradictions, by an ambivalence that became manifest in all forms of urban self-expression and indeed on all levels of cultural production: it is seen in maps of the city and its surroundings as well as in its architecture,[34] it is felt in historiographical accounts, antiquarian surveys,[35] poetic

[31] Lena Cowen Orlin, 'Boundary Disputes in Early Modern London', *Material London, ca. 1600*, ed. Cowen Orlin, 345-76. Judging from the surviving evidence, a favourite ground for dispute between neighbours seems to have been whose turn it was to clean the cesspit – see also Ben Jonson's famous impression of 'that ugly monster / Ycleped Mud' and the 'merd-urinous load' of the city's innumerable 'night-tubs', 'On the Famous Voyage', *Epigrams*, 133, *Ben Jonson: Poems*, ed. Ian Donaldson (Oxford, 1975), 77-84; 80: ll. 61-5.

[32] John Speed, *The Theatre of the Empire of Greate Britaine* (London, 1676), fol. 29A-B. Quoted in Lawrence Manley, *Literature and Culture in Early Modern London* (Cambridge, 1995), 42.

[33] John Twyning, *London Dispossessed: Literature and Social Space in the Early Modern City* (Basingstoke, 1998), 3.

[34] See *e. g.* the bizarre map of the Strand and Whitehall in Felix Barker and Peter Jackson, *The History of London in Maps* (London, 1990), 12 and 13; and Andrew Gordon, 'Performing London: The Map and the City in Ceremony', *Literature, Mapping and the Politics of Space in Early Modern Britain*, ed. Andrew Gordon and Bernhard Klein (Cambridge, 2001), 69-88.

[35] Manley's chapters on 'The Invention of London' and 'Fictions of Settlement' in *Literature and Culture* remain the most comprehensive study of early modern London historiography. Most recently, Ian Archer has focused on John Stow in the network of early modern antiquarians and historiographers: 'John Stow, Citizen and Historian', *John Stow and the Making of the English Past: Studies in Early Modern Culture and the History of the Book*, ed. Ian Gadd and Alexandra Gillespie (London, 2004).

eulogies, ballads and broadsheets, but it is most evident in official civic pageantry and the various subgenres of London drama – especially city comedy.

'The Cittie is a Commedie'

A second traditional aspect of the genre, which has likewise gained fresh relevance through new critical approaches, is the perennial theme of role-playing, embodied and acted out on the stage as surprisingly sharp-sighted social diagnosis. The various playing companies and playhouses had multiple allegiances, and as Alexander Leggatt has emphasized, city comedies were *about*, but not necessarily *for* citizens: 'the angle from which middle-class characters and situations are portrayed is not determined primarily by the special interests of that class, or of any other.'[36] Actors were servants of noblemen, later even of the king and his family, but they were also commercial entertainment-mongers. The court protected and appropriated the theatre and would indirectly be responsible for its temporary demise; the city's aldermen sought to suppress or at least control it yet employed professional playwrights and actors to devise and perform in the Lord Mayor's Show; the playgoers determined who would flourish or fail at the box office. Many factors influenced the business of the theatre, and writers and actors continually had to negotiate the thin line between titillation and provocation, between allowed foolery and bitter satire, between the traditional view of theatre as popular recreation and the gradually emerging view of drama as a form of literary art.

Critics have disagreed about the documentary value, the degree of realism, even naturalism, in Jacobean city comedies, about the question of how far the satirist has exaggerated human vice and folly in order to distort them into recognition, and in what ways the conventions of genre and the requirements of dramatic presentation have shaped the 'London scene' presented on stage. This debate is in part futile, in part spurious – playwrights and actors had to keep many different sorts of customer satisfied, and a society that represented itself so insistently as a stage full of actors was, up to a point, realistically and naturalistically portrayed in plays that fed upon their characters' zest for self-fashioning. Among city comedy's most obsessive points of interest are the social mechanisms of wishful thinking manifest in people's self-elevation and deliberate dissociation from 'outsiders':

> Here is a cloak cost fifty pound, wife,
> Which I can sell for thirty, when I ha' seen
> All London in't, and London has seen me.
> Today I go to the Blackfriars playhouse,
> Sit i'the view, salute all my acquaintance,
> Rise up between the acts, let fall my cloak,
> Publish a handsome man, and a rich suit,
> As that's a special end why we go thither,
> All that pretend to stand for't o' the stage.

[36] Alexander Leggatt, *Citizen Comedy in the Age of Shakespeare* (Toronto, 1973), 4.

> The ladies ask who's that, for they do come
> To see us, love, as we do to see them.
> Now shall I lose all this for the false fear
> Of being laughed at? (*The Devil is an Ass* [1616], 1.6.28-40)

Fitzdotterel is an enthusiastic playgoer. He has seen Jacobean city comedies on stage, and he knows that country squires like himself, who come to town to preen themselves and ogle others in the manner of a fashionable city gallant, run the risk of being ridiculed for making a spectacle of themselves. He is one of many Jonsonian characters labouring under fiction-induced delusions of grandeur.[37] In fact, there is grandeur as well as shrewdness in Fitzdotterel's one-man show of conspicuous consumption in the Blackfriars' auditorium. There is something noble in being perfectly aware of ridicule and sticking to one's guns. And after all he is accurate in his view that a man was made by an effective public performance. Andrew Gordon, following Michel de Certeau, has analyzed the 'performance of a city', especially the spaces created by the 'practitioners' at street level and the diverging constructions of the city in contemporary plays, poems and ceremonies.[38] City comedy, with its projection of London's everyday interactions, is certainly the genre of the 'performance of a city' *par excellence* – as the tribune Sicinius observes in *Coriolanus* (1608): 'What is the city but the people?' (3.1.198).[39]

Through their dramatic characters, playwrights again and again presented the experience of having to play a 'part' in life – the futility of striving for the definite performance, the humiliation of having to perform according to others' wishes or commands, the fear of being hissed off the stage – yet they would also joy in a successful performance, the pleasure of manipulating one's audience, and the often erotic thrills of impersonation, of shape-shifting. When, in *Every Man In His Humour* (1598), Brainworm enters in his disguise as a maimed soldier in order to spy on his master's son in London, he admits that the enjoyment of a disguise is partly the enjoyment of self-creation: 'I cannot choose but laugh, to see myself translated thus, from a poor creature to a creator' (2.2.1-2). The proliferating genre of the advice manual or style book for upwardly mobile citizens reflects the new need for orientation and the necessity to adopt self-conscious urban roles.[40] City comedies analyse these personal schemes and social processes on stage; instrumental intelligence, 'resourcefulness' and spontaneity are rewarded while the adherence to traditional value systems lands the characters on the sidewalks of the action. Urban satire not only exposed social role-playing, it also taught playgoers how to go about it and what pitfalls to avoid. It has been suggested that these meta-theatrical lessons in role-playing took the sting out of privilege and social stratification, paradoxically both by showing the skull beneath the silk and by

[37] See Robert N. Watson, *Ben Jonson's Parodic Strategy: Literary Imperialism in the Comedies* (Cambridge, Mass., 1987), esp. 2-3.

[38] Gordon, 'Performing London: The Map and the City in Ceremony', *passim*.

[39] Unless otherwise noted, all Shakespeare quotations in this volume follow *The Riverside Shakespeare*, gen. ed. G. Blakemore Evans, 2nd ed. (Boston, 1997).

[40] See Leinwand, *The City Staged*, 3-5 and 9.

teaching playgoers lessons in improving what Norbert Elias would call their 'social habitus'.[41]

Clever and ruthless operators had a good chance to rise in London society. The city's elite was relatively 'open' when compared with the oligarchic patriciates of the Italian city states,[42] but interrelations between London's social and political elite and the country's territorial gentry or nobility became tighter as rich merchants dissociated themselves and their families from common townspeople:

> Economic conditions accelerated a process of polarization between rich and poor which subverted traditional perceptions of order and degree yet which simultaneously fostered the values of authoritarianism and a class society. [...] Increasingly property-owners of whatever rank or position identified themselves with the prosperity of the gentry against the rabble.[43]

The figure of the monarch complicated matters. Through the sale of monopolies, the acceptance of private loans from rich merchants, a system of favouritism and the sale of knighthoods (as denounced in *Eastward Ho*), James I contributed not a little to an atmosphere of social insecurity and unwholesome personal competition both at court and in the city. The most basic distinction between 'romantic' and 'satiric' representations of early modern London is that some plays affirm the stability of the social order by fantasizing the ladder of advancement as a broad and steady set of stairs to those of noble principles and moral conduct, while other plays observe with perverse pleasure that noble principles and moral conduct are unaffordable luxuries in a rapacious, fast-changing world, and that social mobility is a slippery scale more likely to lead to a farcical tumble than to a dignified ascent. Social climbers like Lady Petronel Flash, neé Gertrude Touchstone sneered at 'this miserable "chity"' (*Eastward Ho*, 1.2.118-19) that they hoped to leave behind. The cultural historian is confronted not with the accomplished fact but with the ongoing process of social, political and cultural differentiation, evidence of which 'survive[s] not as text and subtext in the urban narrative, but as competing and coexistent texts.'[44]

The same competition and coexistence characterized the epoch's repertoire of stage plays. While we admire the artistic achievement of such Caroline triumphs as Middleton's fusion of city comedy with court intrigue in what may be the first bourgeois tragedy in *Women Beware Women* (1633), or Richard Brome's carnivalesque urban comedy *The Antipodes* (1637), we have to acknowledge that 'Elizabethan rep' was thriving at the Red Bull, the Hope, the Fortune and to some extent at the Globe up to the closing of the theatres. Less well-off Londoners

[41] See Anthony B. Dawson and Paul Yachnin, *The Culture of Playgoing in Shakespeare's England: A Collaborative Debate* (Cambridge, 2001), in which Yachnin states that the theatre 'afforded the cultural consumers of Shakespeare's time an opportunity to play at being their social "betters" and a limited mastery of the system of social rank itself' (41).

[42] Alexander Cowan, *Urban Europe, 1500-1700* (London, 1998), 52-3.

[43] John Guy, 'The 1590s: The Second Reign of Elizabeth I?', *The Reign of Elizabeth I: Court and Culture in the Last Decade*, ed. John Guy (Cambridge, 1995), 1-19, 10.

[44] Cowen Orlin, 'Introduction', *Material London, ca. 1600*, 9.

generally cut down their attendance at plays after the economic crisis and decline in wages in London and the provinces during the mid-1590s,[45] and it seems indisputable that some playhouses, notably the Red Bull in Clerkenwell, began to cater more for the lower end of the social spectrum of playgoers, while the more expensive indoor houses at Blackfriars and Whitefriars offered more exclusive cultural experiences. But this differentiation was a development of the second decade of the seventeenth century.[46] It would be tempting to discover a polarization of earlier Jacobean tastes, modes and playhouses into 'coterie satire at indoor halls' and 'popular comedy at amphitheatres', but this assessment, which would associate the genre of satiric city comedy firmly with the boy companies at the private playhouses, was modified in the first major study of the genre:

> Despite the fact that city comedy originated at Blackfriars and Paul's, [it] was never so tied to Coterie style that its development had to cease when the zenith of Coterie popularity passed in about 1606, and in fact the great triumphs of city comedy appeared after Blackfriars was taken over by the King's Men in 1608-9.[47]

Indeed, the first fully-fledged satiric city comedy, Jonson's *Every Man In His Humour*, had been staged by the Chamberlain's Men at the Curtain in 1598; *Volpone* (1605-6), *The Alchemist* (1610) and *The Devil is an Ass* (1616) were performed at the Globe, *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1613) was a late success at the old Swan and *Bartholomew Fair* opened the Hope in 1614. 'The genre grew out of a process of creative imitation and cross-fertilization between playwrights competing both as individuals and as servants of rival companies'.[48]

'Come along and buy nothing': Merchants and Mercenaries

It is not the least of the many ironies that crowd around the genre of satiric city comedy that while it purports to condemn avarice and fraud as anti-social and as contrary to the comic spirit, the plays derive much of their dramatic energy from depicting the rise and fall of ingenious tricksters and the exploits of prodigal sons. The playing companies themselves were tightly run commercial concerns that had to keep at least one eye on the box office; and they made no bones about their financial dependence on the playgoers. They 'served' their common customers in a different way but no less earnestly than their noble patrons. The first moral satire expressly set in London, *The Three Ladies of London* (c. 1581) had announced itself as a market commodity:

[45] Leo Salingar, 'Jacobean Playwrights and "Judicious" Spectators', *British Academy Shakespeare Lectures 1980-89*, ed. E. A. J. Honigmann (Oxford, 1993), 231-53, 236.

[46] It was also still quite a long way away from our 'modern' appreciation of a dramatic text as an aesthetic object set apart from the mundane world, see Charles Whitney, 'Ante-Aesthetics: Towards a Theory of Early Modern Audience Response,' *Shakespeare and Modernity: Early Modern to Millenium*, ed. Hugh Grady (London, 2000), 40-60.

[47] Gibbons, *Jacobean City Comedy*, 14.

[48] *Ibidem*, 14-15.