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Satirising Folly in Some of Jonson's Late Comedies

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In this paper I shall focus upon three of Jonson's later plays which illustrate some features of his substantial presentation of folly: *Bartholomew Fair* (1614), *The Devil Is an Ass* (1616) and *A Tale of a Tub* (1633). Some of these characteristics might have appeared in earlier work, but I would like to suggest that in the plays I discuss, folly is a major ingredient in the theatrical achievement, as well as reflecting Jonson's views about the nature and function of comedy. The late plays as a group are notable for their innovation and the fact that they are individually conceived and distinct from one another as regards subject matter and technique, and yet there is some evidence that Jonson had some persistent ideas about folly and comedy, though he never made a direct and formal exegesis as far as we know.

At the beginning of his *Works*, printed in 1616, stands a newly-written Prologue to *Every Man in His Humour*, a play which he had revised especially for this publication. In it he deplores the romantic comedy of his predecessors and he sets an objective to "sport with human follies, not with crimes" (Pro.24).¹ This distinction between folly and crime is presented in such a way as to claim

1 References are to individual titles or to poetry collections within *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, ed. Bevington, Butler, Donaldson *et al.*; the titles of poetry collections are followed by poem numbers plus line numbers.

that entertainment is a primary purpose and that, though he may have a moral perspective, he is not seeking blame or punishment. The latter, as we shall see, is manifest in the conclusions of the three plays under review here.

It is perhaps Jonson's misfortune that so often we are drawn to define his achievement by comparing him with Shakespeare: I am afraid I am going to do so again here. One of the most striking aspects of his treatment of folly is his avoidance of the traditions of stage clowns and fools which Shakespeare inherited and developed extensively. Recent work on the Elizabethan and Jacobean presentation of folly has elaborated on Shakespeare's exploitation of the performing skills of the two fools Will Kempe and Robert Armin.² Kempe appeared as Lance in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and later as Dogberry in *Much Ado about Nothing*, and was succeeded in the Lord Chamberlain's Men by Armin in 1599, who presumably played Touchstone, Feste and Lear's Fool, among other roles. Their comic styles were different, and Shakespeare made use of both. Kempe was large and clumsy with a grotesque face, while the witty Armin was wiry and dextrous, and of short stature. Kempe's performing style recalled the clumsy rustic clowns like Richard Tarlton, who himself had a long life on and off the stage, while parts were created for Armin which depended upon witty and ingenious language. If we put Dogberry against Touchstone, we find essentially that the former is the object of ridicule, while the latter survives by bringing out the folly in nearly everyone he meets. Both, however, have contrasting aspects within the plots of the respective plays, in as much as Dogberry does indeed, in spite of his comic and pretentious incompetence, reveal a dangerous villainy, and Touchstone is embarrassed by his marriage with the bucolic Audrey. Shakespeare accommodated these different styles in his plays and made the performance by these actors a significant feature. Sometimes the fool elements were free-standing, with little effect upon the plot, giving specialised entertainment opportunity for the performers. Such was Lance's soliloquy in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, which featured his dog and no doubt gave scope for Kempe to improvise (IV.iv.1-33). It may be that Shakespeare was always conscious of opportunities to entertain, and he may have been motivated by the need to provide regular employment for the skills of fellow members of the Chamberlain's Men.³ Quite frequently he provided a secondary part for a clown as a foil, as in the Second

2 See Wiles, McMillin and MacLean, Thomson, Campbell, and Hornback.

3 Kempe was one of five actor-shareholders from 1598.

Gravedigger in *Hamlet*, and the Shepherd, labelled as a Clown in the text, who works scenes with Autolycus in *The Winter's Tale*.⁴

From about 1597 Ben Jonson had an active presence as actor and author on the London stage and he was certainly aware of these ways of presenting folly, but, with a few minor exceptions, he avoided the techniques and practices employed by Shakespeare and the fools he worked with, pursuing instead his own perceptions of the nature of comedy. Possibly he was concerned that the fools might pervert the main work of the play, an uneasiness expressed by Hamlet who urges that the clowns “speak no more than is set down for them” (*Ham.*, III.ii.39).⁵ If there is no formal manifesto, there are nevertheless a number of relevant items scattered through the works which help to focus Jonson’s view about comedy and folly’s place in it and to a large extent these contrast with Shakespeare’s practice.⁶

It cannot be doubted that Jonson knew about the kind of stage fooling mentioned above. As early as 1607 he puts fools and devils alongside “antique relics of barbarism” (*Volpone*, Epistle, l. 60), and it is possible that the role of Carlo Buffone, who is described as a “jester” in Jonson’s notes on the characters in *Every Man out of His Humour* (1599), owes something to the clown tradition. But Jonson at this early stage has circumscribed his impact by making him offensive: “His religion is railing and his discourse ribaldry.”⁷ The Stage-Keeper in *Bartholomew Fair* laments the absence of the famous rustic clown “Master Tarlton” (Ind.27-30).⁸ What he actually says does not condemn Tarlton in so many words, rather the contrary, yet there is no doubt that this mention of him is meant by Jonson to make him seem outmoded. The Gossips in *The Staple of News* (1626), for their part, are more egregiously misguided, and they are used to signal the passing of old ways of comedy. Tattle recalls that her “husband, Timothy Tattle (God rest his

4 See Happé. Similarly, Touchstone is supported by William, the simpleton clown, in *AYL*, Vi.

5 In his note on this passage in the Arden Shakespeare, Jenkins cites a passage by Richard Brome, *The Antipodes* (II.ii.40-49), where an actor is condemned for improvising “to move mirth and laughter ... [as] in the days of Tarlton and Kempe” (47-48).

6 Perhaps it is worth remembering at this point that Jonson was a professed admirer of Shakespeare, in spite of such differences in practice, as the dedicatory poems he contributed to Shakespeare’s First Folio in 1623 confirm. Donaldson (p. 37) has suggested that Jonson played a significant role in the preparation of this volume.

7 Steggle has shown that the role of Buffone is based upon Charles Chester, a real-life jester who earned his living by railing, a sort of tavern fool.

8 Tarlton died in 1588. But for Brome, a follower of Jonson, this was “Before the stage was purg’d from barbarism” (*Antipodes*, II.ii.49); cf. Creaser, ed., *Bartholomew Fair*, Ind.28n.

poor soul), was wont to say there was no play without a fool and a devil in't" (1 Intermean, 25-26) and Censure, her companion, subsequently echoes her (2 Intermean, 1-2). They demonstrate a lack of understanding and enjoyment of the play they are witnessing and a complementary addiction to older types of comedy. Allied to this is their longing for a Vice, and Tattle recalls how he was carried off to hell on the fiend's back and his dexterity with his wooden dagger (2 Intermean, 5-11).⁹ Jonson's linking of clowns with the Vice, who featured extensively in the interludes from about 1550, is historically plausible, and it is reflected in *The Devil Is an Ass* (1616), where Satan himself perceives that the Vice is now outmoded (I.i.79-88).¹⁰

Jonson's distaste for the stage conventions of fools and clowns is matched by his interest in the theory of comedy which appears at various times in his writings. In the dialogue between Mitis and Cordatus in *Every Man out of His Humour* we find Jonson reflecting upon choices of plots. Mitis complains at one point

that the argument of his comedy might have been of some other nature, as of a Duke to be in love with a Countess, and that Countess to be in love with the Duke's son, and the son to love the lady's waiting maid; some such cross-wooing, with a clown to their servingman. (III.i.407-10)

The presence of the clown in this ironical blueprint, which brings the plot of *Twelfth Night* to mind, illustrates Jonson's wish not to make use of clowns.

As far as the general objectives of comedy are concerned, Jonson identifies the poet's objectives as having the highest moral value. He makes the point in his prefatory Epistle to *Volpone* (1606), where he declares that it is "the office of a comic poet to imitate justice and instruct to life, as well as purity of language or stir up gentle affections" (Epistle, ll. 91-92). Much later we find him seeking the authority of ancient precedents in the *Discoveries*. Although many of the items in this commonplace book are translations or adaptations, it is likely that by appropriating them Jonson was at least demonstrating his interest in what they recorded, even if this does not amount to giving full endorsement. Folly appears in several items, which reveal that Jonson had a distinct sense of its limits and the difficulty of overcoming it: "No precepts will profit a fool" (*Discoveries*, ll. 1256-57).

9 As in Fulwell, *Like Will to Like*, l. 1213 SD, and Wager, *The Longer Thou Livest*, l. 1858 SD.

10 Actually, Jonson does make use of the Vice convention in this play by reversing the convention that the Vice is carried off to hell on the devil's back by ensuring that Pug, his devil, is carried off by Iniquity (V.vi.74-77).

In a long passage with the marginal heading “*De Stultitia*” he compares grownups with children in their foolish appreciation of trifles, with cockleshells and hobby-horses for the one and statues and gilded roofs for the other. He ends the passage, which is derived from Seneca, by attributing what is really the greater folly of adults to the love of money (ll. 1025-32). Further limitations of folly appear in the lack of wisdom: “a fool may talk, but a wise man speaks out of the observation, knowledge and use of things” (ll. 1322-24). A similar breadth is required of the poet, who must read many authors, for if he learns only from himself, “he confesseth his ever having a fool for his master” (l. 1780). These precepts are interesting because they do not reflect the Erasmian perception of the wisdom which is to be found embedded in folly.

Jonson’s perception of the characteristic limitations of dramatic folly is expressed directly in a passage derived from Heinsius, *In Horatium notae*, but specifically recalling and adapting Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Observable characteristics of performances by clowns are seen critically, as is the reaction of audiences to them:

Nor is the moving of laughter always the end of comedy; that is rather a fowling for the people’s delight or their fooling.¹¹ For as Aristotle says rightly, the moving of laughter is a fault in comedy, a kind of turpitude that depraves some part of man’s nature without a disease. As a wry face without pain moves laughter, or a deformed vizard, or a rude clown dressed in a lady’s habit and using her actions; we dislike and scorn such representations, which made ancient philosophers ever think laughter unfitting in wise men. . . . As also it is divinely said of Aristotle that to seem ridiculous is a part of dishonesty, and foolish. (ll. 1866-75)

Though the passage is not Jonson’s originally, we may regard it as substantially representative of his view because it reveals an interest in the effect upon audiences, one of his primary concerns. The idea that the audience itself was made a fool of by the clowns is particularly of interest when we look closely at how folly is presented in the later plays. We might at least suppose that he was apprehensive that the prestige of clowns might be a distraction and might inhibit his wish to make the audience “understanders” rather than befooling them.¹²

These strictures on the effects of comedy discourage the exploitation of folly for engendering vulgar laughter, and instead Jonson seeks a more elevated objective. His interest in this as a phenomenon of the laughter in the theatre is explicit, and he is critical of its clown tradition. As always, his attitude to audi-

11 “Fowling” implies bird catching. It may imply a reference to “dotterel”; see below, n. 18.

12 “To make the spectators understanders” (*Love’s Triumph through Callipolis* [1631], Pro.1).

ences is divided between approval and condemnation. His censure is partly a complaint about “the beast, the multitude”, who love nothing that is right and proper, and whom he blames for what amounts to their immoral laughter:

This was theatrical¹³ wit, right stage jesting, and relishing a playhouse invented for scorn and laughter; whereas, if it had savoured of equity, truth, perspicuity, and candour, to have tasted a wise or learned palate, spit it out presently. (ll. 1893-96)

He adds that “This is truly leaping from the stage to the tumbrell again, reducing all wit to the original dung cart” (ll. 1899-1900).¹⁴

To these theoretical considerations we can also add Jonson’s practice in the masques. Fools and clowns make appearances from time to time, but their effect is closely circumscribed. Those called “clown” are usually meant to be rustic characters, rather than the essentially stage performers who follow the popular convention. There is a morris of Clowns in *The Entertainment at Althorp* (1603), and twelve she-fools dance in *Love Freed from Ignorance and Folly* (1611). Cock-erel, Clod, Townshead and Puppy are called clowns in *The Gypsies Metamorphosed* (1621), where they are tricked by the Gypsies and have their pockets picked. There are named clowns in *The King’s Entertainment at Welbeck* (1633), one of whom, called Stub, has not worn boots because he will be expected to dance, a motif used for John Clay in *A Tale of a Tub*, as we shall see. There is a possibility that William Rowley, the clown actor, played the eponymous leader in *Christmas His Masque* (1617), but his costume was not that of a clown, and similarly in *Chloridia* (1631), Jeffrey Hudson, the Queen’s dwarf, may have played the Dwarf Post from hell.¹⁵ Merefool in *The Fortunate Isles and Their Union* (1625), whose name suggests pure folly, is described as “a melancholic student in bare and worn clothes” (*Fortunate Isles*, l. 13). These scattered incidents are the nearest Jonson comes to the professional stage clowns in the masques, and it would seem that the convention had little relevance to the kind of entertainment he was concerned to provide at court. It is, however, noteworthy for our purpose here that in his marginal note 3 to *Love Freed* (l. 762), he writes, “no folly but is born of ignorance”, a point

13 Note Jonson’s pejorative connotation for this word here.

14 In his poems, Jonson frequently identifies fools who do not measure up to his standards: see *Epigrams* 28.22, 52.56, 56.13, 61.1-2, 90.1; *Forest*, ll.65-68; *Underwood*, 6.1, 25.51-52, 29.58.

15 See *Althorp*, l. 409; *Love Freed*, l. 758; *Gypsies*, l. 505; *Welbeck*, l. 672; *Christmas*, l. 252; *Chloridia*, l. 368; and *Fortunate Isles*, l. 696.

of view which again negates the possibility of Erasmian wise fools. Ignorance rather than evil is Jonson's target.

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Bearing in mind the link between folly and ignorance, I propose to consider in the rest of this paper three plays which were written in the second half of Jonson's career and which illustrate his interest in the continuing variety of comic form. They all are concerned with the exposure of folly and its theatrical exploitation, and they often have distinctly political overtones. We shall find that there are a few echoes of the tradition of stage fooling, but these are rare, and the majority of the features discussed here show Jonson's strikingly inventive interests. I would add that none of these plays were included in the Folio of 1616, and it may well be that this was a time of change in Jonson's writing life. Possibly the retrospective processes of assembling and to some extent revising his works led him to innovation. It should emerge from the following that in *A Tale of a Tub*, Jonson's treatment of folly is somewhat different from that in the other two plays.

Jonson's lifelong interest in comedy took on new aspects in *Bartholomew Fair*, and his interest in the presentation of folly is integral to the play. I would like to illustrate this by brief reference to Justice Overdo and Zeal-of-the-Land-Busy and a more detailed consideration of his technique in the presentation of the foolish Cokes. This necessarily selective treatment is partly due to the fact that the Fair attracts so many foolish characters, bearing out, perhaps, a sense that it is to an extent a feast of fools. But, as Peter Barnes has pointed out (p. 44), the inhabitants of the fair are engaged in making a living, and it is some of the visitors who most exhibit eccentricity and obsession, and it is among these that we find Jonson attacking their follies. That does not mean, however, that there are no serious concerns in the play. The characterisations of Overdo and Busy are both reflections of Jonson's socially alert comedy and concomitant polemic, the one a critique of the exercise of public authority and the other of religious motivation. Both these characters are manifestations of folly, and both are chastened by their ineffectiveness. Overdo, the Justice of the Peace who presides over the special Court of Pie Powders having jurisdiction over the Fair, takes on a disguise as Arthur of Bradley (II.ii.101), a foolish and mad character found in a popular ballad, in order to identify what he calls "enormitees" in others. He makes a foolish mess of his enquiries and at one point is suspected of being a pickpocket

and put in the stocks (IV.i.29). He gravely misreads the character of Edgworth, the ingenious and successful “professional” pickpocket whom he seeks to preserve from the villains he judges to be corrupting him (II.iv.33-34). By the end of the play he has achieved nothing by his muddled misuse of his own authority. As John Creaser has suggested, the play followed James I’s dismissal of the addled Parliament in June 1614 and Jonson was underlining flaws in James’s use of his own authority (Introd., p. 261). The self-prediction in his opening soliloquy is sustained: “They may have seen many a fool in the habit of a justice; but never till now, a justice in the habit of a fool” (II.i.8-10).

Like Overdo, Busy is also put in the stocks. In his case, there is a more obvious moral implication in the characterisation, as he is shown to be corrupt and greedy. Jonson uses Quarlous as a means of describing this foolish character from the outside, as it were. The description includes the idea of a “lunatic conscience” and “the violence of singularity in all he does” (II.iii.156-57). Busy’s discourse is loaded with rhetorical condemnation of evils in others: “The wares are the wares of devils, and the whole Fair is the shop of Satan!” (III.ii.47-49). In spite of this condemnation, he quickly responds to the smell of roast pig, scenting after it like a hound (93-94 SD). He encourages others to follow him into Ursla’s booth with the specious argument that “We ’scape so much of the other vanities by our early entering” (105-6). Once his appetite is satisfied, he inveighs against the Fair with renewed zest, exposing evidence of what he alleges is its devilishness and its popery. Leatherhead loses patience with him and has him put in the stocks for disturbing the peace. Busy responds by rejoicing in his affliction and resumes his witnessing of abuses which in Puritan fashion he regards as being in need of reformation (IV.vi.102). Jonson is exploiting the language of the Puritans as well as their moral attitudes, and once again the folly he perceives turns upon foolish inconsistencies perceived satirically.

The apogee of Busy’s folly is achieved in the last act of the play, when his moral pretensions in criticising drama are exposed by the Puppet Dionysius. Here Jonson is addressing and breaking through some conventional ideas which attacked the theatre, particularly the moral argument that plays are sinful because they involve cross-dressing. When the puppet reveals that he, or rather it, has no sex, Busy is entirely confuted. At this point, Jonson really does cut short his foolish rhetoric: his two remaining speeches are minimal and entirely free of the wordy polemic he had previously used. As with his treatment of Overdo, Jonson uses these foolish aspects of Busy’s behaviour to comment upon a con-

temporary problem, the control of revolutionary Presbyterian sentiment, as well as the anti-theatrical sentiment of some Puritans.¹⁶

In the characterisation of Cokes, Jonson comes a little closer to the tradition of stage fools, and some of his actions and comments could well be played effectively by an actor operating in the stage fool tradition, particularly as Cokes is so gullible, inviting a response as though he were a natural fool. He is not exposing the follies of others so much as revealing his own vulnerability and exciting mockery for it. In order to accentuate this, Jonson provides onstage comments, and he has Cokes show off his folly to all who are watching, whether onstage or in the audience. Jonson does nevertheless create an individual character who is articulate about himself and has a distinct role to play among the variety of customers at the fair. Notably, he is not a rustic: he has plenty of money, which he spends foolishly, and is described in the cast list as “an esquire of Harrow”. As far as narrative is concerned, we see him lose his purses, one by one, and Nightingale steals his sword, cloak and hat (IV.ii.42) as his misfortunes mount.

But it is the dramatic mode through which this decline is presented which makes his folly so prominent. Jonson uses different dramatic techniques by means of the comments made about Cokes and his self-revelation in his own language. In the external description of him, Wasp, his Man, plays a significant role, and he gives us an indication of what is to come by his introductory description. According to him, and referring to the topic of ignorance, Cokes has learned nothing from his schoolmasters, and all he can do is sing tunes he hears sung by others. Besides suggesting Cokes’s empty-headedness, this also gives a hint of how the dramatist is going to befool him, and Wasp proves prophetic, as well as alerting the audience. Wasp’s comments are enhanced when he carries Cokes off on his back in the theatrical motif we have already noted, whereby the Devil carried the Vice off to hell in some interludes. As the play develops, Wasp’s devastating comments show him mocking his master insistently, mostly in ways Cokes cannot understand, so that there is a hint here of the interplay between the witty and natural fools of stage tradition.¹⁷ Between the two episodes in which Cokes loses his purses, Wasp sarcastically encourages him to buy worthless merchandise and gives him the words which help to establish his folly: “A resolute fool you are, I know, and a very sufficient Coxcomb” (III.iv.32). Jonson makes opportunities

16 See Creaser, *Introd.*, pp. 263–64.

17 Wasp links Cokes and Overdo: “Because he [Overdo] is an ass and may be akin to the Cokeses” (II.vi.15).

to label Cokes as a fool: besides his name, which means “simpleton”, and “coxcomb” and “fool”, we find “ass” (I.v.34, II.vi.15) and “bobchin” (III.iv.67). However, the commentary upon Cokes is not confined to Wasp, for in Act Three, Scene Five—a set piece of comedy in which Cokes loses his second purse—Jonson employs another pair of observers in Winwife and Quarlous, who witness the action, praise the skill of the pickpocket and, by their comments, ensure the audience do not miss details of the folly visible on the stage. We shall probably never know whether the ingenious business by which Edgworth tickles Cokes’s ear while he searches first the wrong pocket and then the correct one was an invention in the playhouse, as the scene was rehearsed by inventive actors able to work an audience, or whether Jonson invented it entirely himself, but he has incorporated this moment of folly into the printed text. There is a further fascinating detail here, in that Edgworth refers to what is about to happen as “Dorring the Dotterel” (IV.i.16), a phrase which links this episode with the folly of Fitzdottrel in *The Devil Is an Ass*, through the proverbially foolish plover who is so easy to deceive.¹⁸

Cokes has his own language, and a good deal of it points directly to his own folly. This comes through his simple enthusiasm for what he encounters. His self-betrayal is best illustrated by his comments during the second pickpocket episode. The song, in which he enthusiastically joins in singing the burden, is about pickpocketing, and he foolishly boasts that he has not (yet) lost his second purse. He exclaims in a way which is cleverly self-reflective that “The rat-catchers’ charms are all fools and asses to this” (III.v.115-16), and a moment later, as he again shows that he still has his purse, he boasts with clumsy irony to Mrs Overdo, “Sister, I am an ass! I cannot keep my purse!” (126). Repetition and the memory of the audience play a part in this episode.

During the puppet show towards the end of the play, Cokes performs further foolish actions. He is utterly captivated by what he sees, and his device of identifying the toys he has bought from Leatherhead with the characters played by the puppets intensifies the picture of his quaint folly. He makes his pipe into Pythias and his drum into Damon (V.iii.185, 230). But here Jonson has more than one objective, as he breaks down the whole idea of theatrical illusion and so brings into question the purpose of performance. Because Cokes presses the action forward by his impatience, and by the occasions when he speaks for

18 Cf. Mercraft’s remark, “anything takes this dott’reil” (II.viii.59).

the puppets himself in his own words (V.iii.200-1), the idea of theatrical illusion is undermined. When he enquires whether Leatherhead has been hurt by the puppet, the reply is, “O no! / Between you and I, sir, we do but make a show” (V.iv.221-22).

Jonson’s exposure of folly in this play depends upon the invention of characters who have coherent personalities and who show a significant level of self-consciousness and self-regard. He does use stage devices which could have served clowns and fools and their diverting of the audiences, but these are embodied in discernible personalities. This is achieved in part by the contradictions which these characters embody, especially in Overdo’s remarkable misapplication of justice and Busy’s conflicted moral stance. Such paradoxes are part of Jonson’s preoccupation with stimulating his audiences toward moral judgement. But even here there is an exploitation of ambiguity, for when we come to the end of the play, it seems there is no resolution for most of the follies raised, and there remains a feeling that they will continue. If the characterisation of Cokes owes something to the techniques employed in the stage fool tradition, there is one important addition: egregious though his folly may be, he is essentially innocent, and indeed his stupidities are so great that he may arouse some pity, which is interwoven with mockery. We might also feel for the enthusiasm he exhibits in the two main scenes of folly, the pickpocketing and the puppet play.

In *The Devil Is an Ass*, as we have noted, Jonson was considering the presentation of folly onstage and looking for a new way, in order to deal with some abuses of the time that he perceived. To do so he does pick up on the traditional motif of two entwined parts representing folly in the characters of Fitzdottrel and Pug the devil who comes to serve him. This relationship is based upon misconceptions and misunderstandings, and these continually bring attention back to the folly of both characters. Ignorance again plays a part. Thus, when Fitzdottrel becomes dissatisfied with Pug’s service, he decides to keep him on because he likes the name Devil chosen by Pug for his time on earth. This foolish decision is compounded because Fitzdottrel had been anxious to meet a devil and is frustrated that he cannot find one, even though Pug has reassured him that he really is the very thing sought. It is quite difficult to distinguish which is the greater specimen of folly. The title of the play draws attention to Pug as an ass, and he is far from the figure of menace and deception traditionally attributed to a devil. But Fitzdottrel is egregiously foolish, and attention is drawn to this by his own actions, the actions of others and the comments which are made upon him.

The initial human event is that Fitzdottrel agrees to submit his wife to a conversation with Wittipol in return for an expensive cloak. This bargain is described as “the price of folly” by Wittipol (I.iv.59), and Manly, his companion, remarks that “if it were not for his folly I might pity him” (I.vi.61-62), a sentiment which might have applied to Cokes, as we noticed earlier. Later Fitzdottrel shows his folly in being taken in by Merecraft, who seeks to sell projects to him, including the use of dogskins and making wine from raisins (II.i.65-75, 96-107). It is still later that we find Merecraft’s comment that “anything takes this dott’reil” (II.viii.59). Perhaps his greatest folly is being taken in by Wittipol, who is now disguised as a Spanish Lady come to teach Mrs Fitzdottrel fashionable manners. Fitzdottrel is so smitten by “her” that he wishes to make her his heir. The word “fool” is widely used, and synonyms proliferate: “moonling”, “cokes”, “nupson”, “ass”, are all to be found, and then there is the name Fitzdottrel itself, as we have noted. The identification of his folly continues into the last act, when he is persuaded to pretend that he is possessed by the devil. Wittipol calls him a fool during this performance (V.viii.86) and Manly sees him as venting his follies (153).

But if there is a prominence of folly in Fitzdottrel, Pug shows much the same ineptitude in his conduct of affairs. He becomes involved in the relationship between Mrs Fitzdottrel and Wittipol because her husband sets him on guard to monitor her movements. When Wittipol calls, she is far too clever for Pug, and in instructing him to tell Wittipol not to do exactly what she wants him to do, she makes use of him as a messenger to prepare for an assignation. Pug is utterly confused by her instructions, and as he goes off to carry them out he exclaims with unconscious irony, “This is some fool turned!” (II.ii.61). Near the end of the play, Satan sums up Pug’s achievements on the day he has been allowed to spend on earth in order to do as much evil as possible. He has been beaten by his master; he has failed to facilitate a “deed of darkness” (seduction); he has been cheated of a valuable ring by means of a false beard and a reversible cloak, and allowed human beings to realise that they can do more harm than a devil:

Whom hast thou dealt with
 Woman or man, this day, but have outgone thee
 Some way, and most have proved the better fiends? (V.vi.61-63)

The two roles of Fitzdottrel and Pug are closely interwoven, and each seems to enlarge the folly of the other. They are each entrapped in their follies, and nothing they do seems to make it possible for them to shake off the hold

which folly has upon them. If their incompetence and misjudgements were not so ridiculous, they would be tragic in their inevitability. The intricacy of their interrelationship may be funny and ingenious, but it is also a reflection of Jonson's rather pessimistic approach to public affairs in this play. The resourceful evils of the inhabitants of London far exceed Pug's foolishly incompetent attempts to produce evil results for his day in town. His concern with the evils of London life, with greed and corruption, are matched with unease about the problem of monopolies and those who exploit them. At this point in his career, Jonson was probably at his most influential. Though he was loyal to James I, he was also circumspectly critical of royal policies, particularly regarding monopolies, and in this play we can see both sides of his thinking. Folly is thus made a part of a wider purpose, and the ingenuity of his exploitation of it may be entertaining, but it reflects the serious role of the poet who might, in Jonson's conception of the poet's role, advise the monarch.

In one respect, however, the egregious folly of Fitzdottrel is turned to good effect. Wittipol's original approach to Mrs Fitzdottrel appears to be an attempted seduction, and indeed his courtship of her is made physically explicit at one point (II.vi.70 SD). But in the end, his success in his disguise as the Spanish Lady reveals Fitzdottrel's folly over his extravagance. When Mrs Fitzdottrel, who describes herself as "matched to a mass of folly" (IV.vi.20), appeals to Wittipol for help, he responds with friendship and support rather than sexual predation. He makes sure that she is no longer threatened by her husband's foolish waste of the marital resources by securing a measure of financial independence for her, even though at the end of the play she is still tied to her husband. In spite of this unexpected benefit, folly remains potent.

In terms of the theatrical traditions we have been discussing, Jonson's manipulation of folly in this play avoids the stage convention of the fool and the clown, and it modifies the presence of the devil to bring out the folly to be found in the incompetent Pug. He creates a world in which folly plays a large part without an abstract personification. His reading of folly in the character of Fitzdottrel exploits the comedy of misapprehension, and it leaves us in the end without the punishment of sin, but at least with a moral sense that there were wrongs to be righted and there are some people who have the intellectual resource to ameliorate social wrongs.

These two plays were written when Jonson was at his most eminent as a playwright, and they share their view of folly and their exploitation of theatri-

cal methods of identifying it. The endings which are reached in each imply that folly is widespread, and they share a detailed exposition of it, one rich in theatrical ingenuity.

In the Prologue to *A Tale of a Tub*, Jonson gives his audience a conspectus which suggests that he was still interested in exploring the possibilities of comedy:

No state affairs, nor any politic club
Pretend we in our tale, here, of a tub,
But acts of clowns and constables today
Stuff out the scenes of our ridiculous play.
A cooper's wit, or some such busy spark,
Illumining the High Constable and his clerk
And all the neighbourhood, from old records
Of antique proverbs, drawn from Whitsun-lords,
And their authorities at wakes and ales,
With country precedents and old wives' tales,
We bring you now, to show what different things
The cotes of clowns are from the courts of kings. (Pro.1-12)

In this conspectus he links the play to two theatrical traditions: farce and the festival kind of entertainment associated with rural communities. The latter, as far as Jonson is concerned, contains Whitsun lords, old wives' tales, and old proverbs and is appropriate to clowns. His choice implies the festival licence of such entertainment. He calls his play "ridiculous", the most likely sense of which comes from the classical Latin *ridiculus*, meaning "capable of arousing laughter" (*OED*). He makes it clear that this kind of entertainment is very different from that which entertains court audiences. Though he still received some financial support from the king, his work was no longer as welcome at court as it had been under James I.

But the court perspective may still be implied in what is portrayed, if only as a distanced view. Many of the characters behave foolishly, and much of the action is about decisions which are misguided, and some are based upon selfish motives. The farcical mode, together with the complex plot, which has many twists and turns and so is hard to disentangle, ensures that we do not take the characters seriously and are moved to laughter by their ridiculous predicaments rather than anything else. In spite of the bad behaviour of some characters, who deceive others for their own gain, the play does not contain severe moral judge-

ments, and there is a distinctly benign ending, in which reconciliation is the chief objective.

Because the Prologue claims that the play avoids state affairs or politics, we are no doubt alerted to the possibility that Jonson is up to something. There are indeed some serious elements in the presentation of the role of the High Constable, Toby Turf, now given a greater role in local affairs by the government's policy, and some satirical anti-Laudian hits at the parish priest, Chanon Hugh. But the confusions and other devices of farce are the main ingredients. These include disguise (one character when disguised is called "broom beard"), mistaken identity, lies and deceptions, inspired opportunism, and wandering about and getting lost between a multiplicity of locations in several villages centred on the country parish of St Pancras in north London. The main event, on St Valentine's Day, is preparation for the intended marriage of Audrey, Turf's daughter, to John Clay, a tilemaker and the bridegroom designated by her parents. This intention is frustrated by the conflicting aspirations of three other suitors, and in the end she marries an unexpected fourth, Pol-Marten, the usher. But all these participants in the courting game, including Audrey herself, hardly raise any emotional interest, and it is the reduction of their adventures to this ridiculous level which chiefly helps to establish the genre of farce.

However, there are two characters who might be considered survivals of the Elizabethan stage traditions of folly. In both, the skills of the clowns might have been valuable, even though Jonson still resists the concept. With John Clay, the would-be bridegroom, and Hannibal Puppy, the Constable's general servant, we catch glimpses of both the natural and the witty fool of earlier plays. Such a retrospect would conform to other items in the play indicating that Jonson was hinting at a Tudor setting. Clay is simple-minded, and he makes an immediate impact on his first entrance through his costume, which Jonson has ensured is described in the dialogue. He explains that he has come wearing wisps of straw on his feet, as he knew that there would be dancing on his wedding day and he didn't want to wear boots for that.¹⁹ His chamois doublet and sausage hose are admired by Turf (I.iv.10-11). However, things go badly for Clay, as he is falsely accused of a robbery at St John's Wood by Hilts, the servant of Squire Tub, another suitor for Audrey. This accusation depends upon recalling his conspicuously foolish costume for identification, and it adds the further details that his

19 This links him with Stub, as noted earlier.

pinned-up breeches were like pudding bags, and he was wearing yellow stockings and had his hat turned up with a silver clasp (II.ii.125-27). As events unfold following this accusation, Clay feels threatened by the law, and, fearing he will be hanged, he runs away, only to be discovered much later in the play hiding in a barn. But by now it is too late, as Audrey has been married off to someone else. The last we hear of him is that he is sitting at the wedding feast, which had originally been intended to be his, unable to eat and still weeping in fear of being hanged (V.viii.5-7). As far as the management of folly in the play is concerned, it is conspicuous that Clay is given very little to say, and, while we cannot be sure what he might have improvised in performance, it looks as though Jonson was exercising restraint as far as this foolish character is concerned.

Hannibal Puppy's name is a clue to his function, as it makes a play on Ball, a common name for a dog, and so fits with Puppy. He is indeed much concerned with ingenious, but usually pointless word games through the play, as he carries out his main role, which is to be a servant to Constable Turf, entrusted with carrying out his master's requirements. This probably aligns him with the witty servant of classical comedy, and this would seem to be the most likely theoretical justification for Jonson's characterisation. He is not a moral figure, but he is given a number of comic situations which are entertaining. The absence of moral significance relates to the objective of farce and the ridiculous actions he gets up to support this. Thus at one point he is seized upon to be a Valentine by Lady Tub and her maid Dido Wisp, who choose to share him, and so he makes a play upon being a half-Valentine to each. His part is embellished with word tricks including an elaborate pun on sun/son (III.v.53-66), two extravagant comic laments about loss, a bravura display of panic, which must have been fun for the actor to perform, when he mistakes Clay hiding in the barn for a lurking "Satin" (III.ii.1-26, V.iii.14-18 and IV.v.24-48), and, when things are going wrong, a mock heroic and fanciful doom-laden prophecy purportedly made by one of the animals in the farmyard sacrificed ahead of Audrey's wedding (III.ix.55-77).²⁰ Sometimes he adopts a heavy Middlesex accent (as at III.v.46-53). In a moment of crisis over the loss of Audrey, Lady Tub becomes so exasperated by his tricks that she tells him to "leave jesting" (III.v.53). The last piece of fooling associated with him is his marriage to Dido Wisp, one of his half-Valentines; their union seems to depend on the fact that both their names are connected with Carthage (V.v.1-6). These

20 This mock heroic passage has a precedent in Livy, *Histories*, 35.21.4.

comic characteristics give an opportunity for a versatile performance from the player, and they may recall the skills embodied in the tradition of stage fools. It is not clear whether there was a specialist actor available to Jonson at the time, but it does seem as though here he was writing a part requiring particular performance skills in comedy.

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In three of the plays I have considered here, Jonson deliberately modified the stage traditions of folly discernible on the Elizabethan stage, which were still alive in the work of other dramatists. His practice was largely determined by his concern with the moral value of comedy, and he regretted what he saw as the exploitation of folly for superficial and even degrading entertainment. After *The New Inn* was mocked off the stage in 1631, he railed in disgust upon the contemporary stage in his “Ode to Himself”. There he speaks of those who make plays “larding your large ears / With their foul comic socks” (ll. 36-37).²¹ In his later plays, Jonson’s exposure of human follies persistently avoids the fool and clown conventions of his youth. In three plays I have not discussed here, *The Staple of News* (1626), *The New Inn* (1629) and *The Magnetic Lady* (1632), it is hard to find roles which recall the dominance of the stage fools in earlier years. *A Tale of a Tub* differs somewhat because Jonson wanted it to succeed as a farce, and in attempting this he did return in some measure to the stage techniques of folly he had earlier questioned. But even here the folly he perceives is found in the world he creates in the exercise of authority by a magistrate and a constable and the pretensions of a Laudian “Chanon”. Comedy retained for him a moral purpose, and in pursuit of such an objective he regularly set off in different directions, even though he was alert in entertaining his audience. He saw that actors could be entertaining in the presentation of folly on the stage, and in the examples I have been describing, his inventiveness is apparent. Rather than rely upon the tradition of stage clowning, Jonson sought to intrigue his audiences by his inventive excursions into the representation of folly. Traditional elements, where they do survive, are largely points of departure.

21 Cf. Shirley, *The Coronation*: “There doth flow / No undermirth, such as doth lard the scene / For course delight, the language here is cleare. / And confident our Poet bad me say, / Heele bate you but the folly of a Play” (Pro.22-26).

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