



# THE PLACES OF WIT in Early Modern English Comedy

ADAM ZUCKER

AMBRIDGE

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## THE PLACES OF WIT IN EARLY MODERN ENGLISH COMEDY

What is wit made out of in the comedies of Shakespeare, Jonson, Shirley, and their contemporaries? What does it hide? What does it reveal? This book addresses these questions by turning to the relationship between comic form and local history. Explorations of familiar sites – Windsor Forest, Smithfield, Covent Garden, and Hyde Park among them – are matched with close readings of drama that focus on overlays between theatrical, spatial, narrative, and social conventions. Dramatic comedy's definitive interest in cultural competency and incompetence, wit and witlessness, is revealed through discussions of commerce, gambling, royal forests, and new or newly public spaces in and around early modern London. Along with Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and Ben Jonson's *Epicene* and *Bartholomew Fair*, special emphasis is placed on the neglected Town comedies of the 1630s – the forerunners of the Restoration comedy of manners and the satirical realism of our own day.

ADAM ZUCKER is Assistant Professor in the Department of English at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where he teaches courses on Shakespeare, Renaissance drama, and other sixteenth- and seventeenth-century topics. He is the co-editor, with Alan B. Farmer, of *Localizing Caroline Drama: Politics and Economics of the Early Modern Stage, 1625–1642* (2006), and James Shirley's *Love Tricks* for a forthcoming edition of Shirley's complete works. He is a member of the Editorial Board of *English Literary Renaissance*.

*For Heather, Susannah, and Rose*

## *Preface*

"Scholars are not always interested in the drama, nor critics in the facts."

In 2004, I helped organize a seminar entitled "Localizing Caroline Drama" at the annual meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America. The papers presented there ran the gamut of contemporary critical interests. Some focused on the history of playing companies, theaters, and publication patterns in the 1620s and 1630s, some on plays with foreign settings or religious conflict on display, some on economic, political, and erotic relations in plays of all stripes. The playwrights we dealt with were only just beginning to receive the more concerted critical attention they have begun to see since (major new editions of the works of Richard Brome and James Shirley are underway as I write), and, for that reason alone, the seminar might have been viewed with some suspicion by those who weren't participating in it. Why expend so much energy on drama that hadn't been performed in over 300 years? Why bother even to ask after the management of the Salisbury Court theater or the ramifications of James Shirley's sojourn in Ireland in the mid 1630s? We didn't receive those kinds of questions, exactly, at the end of the seminar, when the audience members who had watched our discussions were given the opportunity to chime in. But one observer did ask a question that has stuck with me ever since. Now that I have completed this book, it seems more relevant than it ever did before. The question, asked with a bit of a smirk, was: "Are you all empiricists, or what?"

There were a number of people sitting around the table who would have answered, "Yes." Several scholars had presented work based on straightforward bits of historical evidence bound to the objective foundations associated with the category of the "empirical," though without the thoughtlessness presupposed by the question asked of us. There were also a number of people in the seminar who would have quickly answered,

"No." Their essays on the narrative, language, and/or formal contexts of Caroline drama were never meant to be incontrovertible or mathematically accurate. But there were also several people around the table, and I would put myself in this category, who couldn't really have answered one way or another. I had presented part of my research on Hyde Park and the Shirley play of the same name in an early foray into the material that would become the fourth chapter of this book. I had spent time in various archives and libraries attempting to piece together a new history of Hyde Park that would shed light on *Hyde Park*, a history that would in turn be made richer by the inclusion of Shirley's play within it. On the one hand, I had hoped to find something resembling empirical evidence about the park and its visitors in the 1630s that would explain one thing or another about what Shirley had written. On the other, I wanted quite seriously to preserve and illuminate everything I loved about Shirley's comedy – its hectic scenes of leisurely play; its old-fashioned pastoral emplacement of urbane sophistication; its sly jokes about the politics of dancing, gambling, and fashionable wit. None of these things could be explained by the fact that in 1641 several people were apprehended stealing the pales of Hyde Park in order to build a maypole. I was fascinated by that story nonetheless, and I worked for some time (unsuccessfully, as it turns out) to find a place for it in my study of the play. Was I an empiricist, or what?

It took some time before I realized that the importance of the observer's question – and the reason it resonated so deeply with me – had nothing to do with my answer. The observer no doubt meant it quite literally, but we would do well to recognize the symbolic quotient of the question and, as I put it in this book, to attend to the broader social logic that organizes its effect. The question stakes out a certain amount of epistemological territory – the abstract, aesthetic, decidedly unempirical realm of drama, literature, and narrative, even self-consciously contingent historical narrative – and partitions that privileged field off from the putatively mundane naïveté of fact-based scientific inquiry and essentialist argumentation more generally. I used to care very, very deeply about this divide. As an undergraduate in the early 1990s I did everything I could to place myself on the right side of the line between sophisticated, knowing literary criticism and the innocent kind of scholarship that took fact at face value. By the time I had completed my thesis on travel narratives and the figure of the Moor in *Titus Andronicus* and *Othello*, I believed that it was appropriate and even necessary to put words such as 'truth' and 'real' in quotation marks nearly every time I used them. My recognition of the semiological,

playful openness of narrative and language was so important to me, so intellectually definitive, that I let the political stakes of my writing drown in a sea of rhetorical mediation. This was not the fault of my advisers, who rightly pointed out that my readings of the plays were much more convincing than my theoretical overviews. It was not the fault of anything in particular I had read. Rather, I was seduced by the social logic that privileged anti-empirical literary study itself: the desired disposition it marked off in the context of my community; the comforting pretense of omniscient distance it presupposed. The sociological architecture of literary study presented a comfortable space for me. I slipped into it, happily.

Of course, even then, I did believe in something real. I believed in early modern plays. I believed in them as stunning aesthetic objects and as tools for political debate and historical discovery. I believed that these two aspects of literature – the aesthetic and the historical – were indivisible, and, in fact, that they constituted one another. I believed that good criticism could reveal this, and I knew for a fact that my own perspective on the categories of identity that were central to literary study in the early 1990s had been altered in lasting ways as I studied my favorite plays. I began to think and act differently because of Renaissance drama and the critics and teachers who read it along with me. As a result, I believed whole-heartedly, and I do to this day, in the political force of aesthetic form, literary study, and criticism more generally. To cordon off from criticism the kinds of analysis that fall under the heading of “empiricism” is to misrecognize this potential of literature and its subjects by limiting the extent of the cultural field defined by imagined narrative and art.

This will no doubt strike some of my readers as a naïve, general, and under-theorized philosophy of literature. But this is precisely how I’d like to begin this book. Before I begin to mark off my own ideas alongside those of Raymond Williams and Pierre Bourdieu, I want to pledge my allegiance to naïve pleasure and interpretive confidence. These quantities do not strike me as being incompatible with intellectual rigor and critical acumen, especially when it comes to early modern dramatic comedy. The plays I explore here are devoted to making simple pleasure and sophisticated revelation simultaneous. The places they stage are entirely ordinary – a forest, a fairground, a city square, a newly public park – but comedy makes them fantastic and nearly magical. Lighthearted, cutting, satirical, angry wit binds these oppositional qualities together. There are wits and there are oafs in the chapters that follow, competent and incompetent characters whose differences, I argue, sit at the heart of early modern comic form and its political, historical engagements. There are



characters who roll their eyes at the innocents (though rarely over the question of empiricism) and characters who have no idea that eyes are meant to be rolled at all. Many of us like to identify with the eye-rolling wits. I hope the book that follows presents some sense for the theatrical and social history of this identification, for the local contexts of wit and witlessness, and, most importantly, for the pleasures that are both the subject and the intended effect of early modern comedy.

This book began as a paper I wrote in 1999 in a seminar led by Jean Howard at Columbia University. It grew into a dissertation project under her direction. It became a book over the years as she and I discussed the relationship between place, cultural competency, and comedy. She has been a mentor and a friend for many years now, and I am a better scholar and a better teacher for it. I feel lucky to add my name to the list of people who get to say this to Jean in print and mean it: thank you.

I am grateful, too, for the inspiring intellectual community at Columbia in whose midst I found myself at the turn into the twenty-first century. David Kastan's enthusiastic support helped me realize at a very early moment in my career that I wasn't just a graduate student, I was a scholar. He, Julie Crawford, Anne Prescott, Peter Platt, Jim Shapiro, and Ted Tayler showed me a thousand different ways to take serious pleasure in texts, histories, politics, and teaching. And I feel extremely lucky to have studied alongside a brilliant and generous cohort that is now teaching all over the world. Douglas Pfeiffer, Henry Turner, Patricia Cahill, Ronda Arab, Paul West, Thomas Festa, Doug Brooks, Andras Kisery, Tiffany Werth, Allison Deutermann, Ellen Mackay, and especially Michelle Dowd have all in different ways shaped my ideas here. I owe a special debt of thanks to four friends and collaborators: Alan Farmer, Zachary Lesser, Ben Robinson, and Kent Puckett. Without thinking twice, they have helped me with ideas, critiques, riffs, harmonies, jokes, and encouragement, all of which I've needed over the years. This book would not exist without them.

There are many other mentors and colleagues who have helped lay the foundation for this project. Karen Newman and Coppélia Kahn showed me as an undergraduate that great critics could be committed teachers. My colleagues at the University of Massachusetts Amherst – Arthur Kinney, Joseph Black, Jane Degenhardt, Suzanne Daly, and Jenny Adams, to name only a few – have been a source of intellectual fellowship and support. A large and still-growing group of colleagues and friends have supported my career and my scholarship in various ways over the

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The research for this book has been supported by the Thorsen Fellowship and the President's Fellowship from Columbia University; a W. M. Keck/Mellon Fellowship from the Henry E. Huntington Library; and a Faculty Development grant and a Lilly Teaching Fellowship from the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Among the many librarians, administrators, and colleagues in these institutions, particular thanks to Roy Ritchie at the Huntington Library and Matthew Ouellette at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. My research assistant, April Genung, provided calm and capable support as this manuscript was prepared for the press. Thanks are also due to the anonymous readers and the editorial staff at Cambridge University Press, especially Sarah Stanton, Rebecca Taylor, and Elizabeth Hudson, who have all shaped this book in important ways.

Finally, I owe more than can be lightly expressed to my family. My father, mother, and brother have always been very funny, very generous, and very loving. Their support has been a foundational comfort to me for as long as I can remember, and I look forward to carrying that feeling with me for the remainder of my life. And I dedicate this book to the three people who will always laugh when I'm being funny and always roll their eyes at me when I deserve it: my wife Heather and our two daughters Susannah and Rose. I hope they are able to feel some small fraction of the love I've poured into this sentence every time they read it.

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## Introduction

Dramatic comedy always depends on the distances separating those in the know from those who stand in definitive contrast to them. Shakespeare, Jonson, Shirley and the other dramatists of their day were following classical models and setting precedents for later writers when they filled their stages with skilled and unskilled players of society's commonplace games, be they romantic, financial, sexual, familial – or some combination of all four. Think of Andrew Aguecheek in *Twelfth Night*, tricked by Toby Belch into issuing an empty, brazen challenge to his false rival, Cesario; think of Abraham Dapper in *The Alchemist*, gagged with gingerbread by practiced grifters and stuffed in a privy as he waits for a visit and a blessing from his aunt, the Queen of Fairies; think of Sir Oliver Kix in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, handing his wife over to the auspiciously named Touchwood Senior and paying him good money for a dose of the special medicine guaranteed to solve the problems he and Lady Kix had been having conceiving a child. These characters and the situations that define them are, first and foremost, hilarious. But they are also signposts of dramatic comedy's formal reliance on a set of problems posed by cleverness, by tastefulness, and by the increasing complexity of sociability itself at a turning point in England's history. This book shows how the textual and spatial conventions of comedy enabled early modern audiences and playwrights to explore these problems, to toy with them, and – in the plays I focus on here – to locate them in time and place.

No contemporary of Shakespeare was more attuned to the social intricacies of comic form than Ben Jonson, and his influential vision of moneyed London life, *Epicoene* (1609), offers an ideal introduction to the specific interests of this book. Toward the end of the play's fourth act, Dauphine, one of Jonson's *louche* heroes, is sized up by Lady Haughty, the dean of a women's club known as the Collegiates. "He seems," she claims, "a very perfect gentleman" (4.6.12).<sup>1</sup> Haughty's tastes are often

bitterly ridiculed in *Epicoene*, but here she issues a judgment that jibes neatly with those of the play as a whole. With one unexpected gesture at the end of Act 5 – the removal of a boy actor’s wig – Dauphine reveals himself to be the most perfect, powerful gentleman in the play’s social world. The action that inspires Lady Haughty’s compliment is similarly noteworthy. While being watched by a small sequestered audience that includes Haughty, Dauphine doles out a series of kicks and tweaks to two hopelessly deceived characters who assume they are being abused in private by one another. Having been told that Dauphine arranged the plot that permits these blows to go unpunished, the women who witness his performance immediately turn their erotic attention to him. Lady Haughty’s pronouncement, then, uses the commonplace status designation of “gentleman” to express an allocation of sexually invested social power to Dauphine, and the scene of abuse as a whole works to establish his position of privilege within the world of the play. At the most general level, the situation is not remarkable: social identity is always partially a product of the intersection between performance and interpretation, and in the early modern period status was often explicitly linked to public appearance and behavior.<sup>2</sup> But as Dauphine’s specific actions might suggest, Jonson’s engagement with this process in *Epicoene* is far from routine. By what set of standards could tweaking a blindfolded man in the nose lead to the title of “perfect gentleman”? What sort of status is this?

In order to answer questions such as these, it is necessary to look beyond the common analytical frameworks used to make sense of status difference in early modern London.<sup>3</sup> The most familiar methods of expressing and ordering the heterogeneous social relations of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England are not up to the task: neither the traditional hierarchy of orders and degrees with its political and occupational rankings nor the economic categories of a more modern class-based understanding of status seem to have much to do with the logic that ratifies Dauphine’s authority in *Epicoene*. Sirs John Daw and Amorous La Foole (the kicked and the tweaked, respectively) are, like Dauphine, titled; all three men are knights, and thus all possess a form of privileged political status. None of them works for wages, yet all maintain residences in a fashionable neighborhood in London; all three would thus seem to possess a form of privileged economic status.<sup>4</sup> But while Dauphine is a “perfect gentleman,” it is obvious from the moment Daw and La Foole appear onstage that the social power that should adhere to their titles and incomes is completely absent. They are abject characters, and by the time

audiences and readers reach the fourth act, the abuse Daw and La Foole receive at the hand (and foot) of Dauphine fits seamlessly into the comic imperatives of the play. A different sort of status formation is at work in *Epicoene* and in each of the plays under consideration in this book, an increasingly prevalent logic of social power which uses differences in taste, in aptitude, and in cultural fluency to supplement, to compete with, and at times to disguise entirely the developing economic and political relations of early modern England.

Jonson and his contemporaries gave this mode of status a straightforward and still familiar name: they called it “wit.” We might follow their lead, note that the heroes of Tudor and Stuart comedy are “witty,” and honestly leave it at that. But as the example of Dauphine’s sadism might suggest, there is something ambiguous, difficult, and deeply meaningful built into wit, its representation on the comic stage, and its relationship to social and cultural history. Wit often hides more than it reveals. This is certainly true on a semantic level. The word’s most commonsense definitions for our context – the *OED* offers “cleverness; mental quickness or sharpness, acumen” and “practical talent” among others – smudge the distinctions between the numerous aptitudes, jibes, schemes, and mannered behaviors that color early modern comedy, all of which fall under wit’s heading.<sup>5</sup> That said, those who have attempted to unpack the term’s less obvious meanings – this group includes some of the most skilled critics and philologists of the past century – often wander down blind alleys: William Empson determined in *The Structure of Complex Words* that wit in Pope’s “Essay on Criticism” was best explained with the formula “3c+?2+1a-.1£1,” while C. S. Lewis, writing in part to respond to Empson’s quasi-mathematical analysis, ends his own exploration in *Studies in Words* with the less-than-helpful observation that wit “enables us to distinguish; to point at this, and therefore not at that.”<sup>6</sup> Lewis’s assessment is only slightly less mystifying than Empson’s formula. But this is as it should be. Part of wit’s purpose – both as a word and as a set of practices – is to be mystifying, even as it draws distinctions between “this ... and therefore not that.” This is true not only in linguistic expression but in social life as well, insofar as we can separate the two. To be witty, or clever, or tasteful, in the ways that Dauphine and his fellow gallants are in *Epicoene*, is not simply to speak or act well but to exist in a privileged relation to the spaces and materials of a given environment, a relation that in its outward bearings often obscures the basic fact that mundane spaces and materials make wit possible in the first place.

I'll return to this idea below, but before I delve into the more abstract ramifications of the argument I intend to set forth here, I'd like to return for a moment to the detailed comic landscape of *Epicoene*. In it, we can begin to see what's at stake for a reading of Tudor and Stuart comedy that treats wit as a social or material quantity that can push important relationships out of focus. Let us return to the oafish Jack Daw. His idiocy is staged not only through his subjection to Dauphine but also through a typically Jonsonian excoriation of his aesthetic judgments and his literary ignorance: on the most basic level, he deserves to be kicked because he "pretends only to learning" (1.2.73). Early in the play, Clerimont and Dauphine goad Daw into a discussion of classical authors during which he first ridicules Seneca and Plutarch as "Grave asses! Mere essayists!" (2.3.46) then runs through a catalog of no fewer than twenty other authors in order to dismiss them (2.3.53–65). The responses of the gallants to this list are telling:

CLERIMONT: What a sackful of their names he has got!

DAUPHINE: And how he pours them out! Politian with Valerius Flaccus!

(2.3.66–67)

Daw ends up seeming foolish for two obvious reasons. First of all, he has bad taste, or, at least, he has standards that are so indiscriminately negative that they seem to be no standards at all. Second, he is unable to arrange knowledge into historical categories; the gallants rip into him for including Poliziano, a fifteenth-century humanist, in a list of classical authors. Dauphine and Clerimont are more learned than Daw; their wit in this context stems in part from their tendency to point this out. But these academic quibbles are not really the point of this scene. The gallants mount a more figurative and more telling attack on Daw's relationship to culture by castigating it as blind accumulation. For Daw, authors' names become commodities in a sack, goods to be poured out and displayed as the occasion arises. Indeed, when Dauphine goes on to ask Daw which writers he appreciates as "authors," Daw responds with a sequence of four *titles*, three in Latin and one, "The King of Spain's Bible," in English, presumably to drive home the joke to audience members with small Latin (2.3.73–74). Daw's already benighted status is further degraded as it becomes evident that he has misread the simplest material elements of print culture. In short, it is not bad enough that Daw commodifies knowledge – he can't even use his commodities correctly.

Whereas John Daw fails to parlay into status his investment in early modern literary culture, the oft-praised Truewit is a mogul of taste.



Instead of blindly accumulating and randomly displaying signs of sophistication, Truewit has an active relationship to them; he reworks knowledge for his own ends and, in doing so, sets himself apart from those who lack his rhetorical skill. Take, for example, his cynical exhortations suggesting that suicide would be preferable to marriage (2.2.19–31). The Juvenalian source of this particular diatribe reads in part, “Can you submit to a she-tyrant [domina] when there is so much rope to be had, so many dizzy heights of windows standing open, and when the Aemilian bridge offers itself to your hand?”<sup>7</sup> Truewit’s formulation recasts the arcane in familiar terms:

Marry, your friends do wonder sir, the Thames being so near, wherein you may drown so handsomely; or London Bridge at a low fall with a fine leap, to hurry you down the stream; or such a delicate steeple i’ the town as Bow, to vault from; or a braver height as Paul’s ... (2.2.19–23)

A similar transformation takes place in Truewit’s discourse on cosmetics as he puts forth the Ovidian position that women, while they should do everything in their power to enhance their appearance, must not let their lovers see them preparing themselves (1.1.108–121; the sentiment is culled from parts of *Ars Amatoria*, III). But rather than merely letting Ovid speak for him, Truewit supports a classical argument with a contemporary example: “How long did the canvas hang afore Aldgate? Were the people suffered to see the city’s *Love* and *Charity* while they were rude stone, before they were painted and burnished? No. No more should servants approach their mistresses but when they are complete and finished” (1.1.116–121).

This localizing refiguration of classical sentiment speaks to Truewit’s improvisational aptitude, his capacity to resituate knowledge so as to make it socially useful; in short, it marks him as “witty” in all the ways that Daw fails to be. And just as Daw’s problems are partially based on his inappropriate relationship to the objects and exchanges of the print marketplace, Truewit’s status is inflected by the material city to which he constantly refers. His claim to status is signified by his ability to remap classical texts onto common social and physical topographies of London.<sup>8</sup> The city’s places, in other words, make visible his own.

This observation runs counter to a line of reasoning that has – up until quite recently – dominated analyses of the play’s comic heroes and of wit more generally in early modern comedy.<sup>9</sup> Beginning with John Dryden’s claim that Truewit “seems mortified to the world by much reading” and that “the best of his discourse is drawn not from the knowledge of