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).[1] 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.[2] 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.[3] 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.[4] 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.[5] 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."[6] 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?"[7] 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.[8] 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.[9] 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

the town, but books," critics have tended to focus on the ways in which Truewit and his cohorts (to say nothing of Jonson himself) are disconnected from the day-to-day matrices of London life.[10] One modern reader of *Epicoene* has stressed the "playful detachment" of the gallants, noting their "independence" from "all positions, values, and convictions";[11] another points out that they have "no commitment to the larger social hierarchy of which they are nominally a part";[12] a third distances the gallants from economic relations by calling them "above mercenariness, mere gain" and goes on to depoliticize their status, claiming, "The king might create a duke, but not even he could create a gentleman."[13] By obscuring the link between wit and other kinds of social and economic relationships, claims such as these reproduce one of the primary fantasies of Jonson's play, a fantasy that runs through many of the other comedies discussed in this book.[14] *Epicoene* is widely regarded to be the first "West End comedy," or the first play to deal exclusively with the concerns of "polite society."[15] It is also, however, the first English play set in London to imagine that wit and tastefulness might exist apart from or eclipse entirely other structures of city life that generate status. Contemporary critics, vested in well-developed forms of the cultural capital that was only beginning to emerge in Jonson's London, have tended to take this premise at face value, treating wit as a transparent sign of inherent status, or as a social form detached from the material world. But while Truewit's knowledge is drawn from books, this knowledge becomes socially functional in the play only when it is projected onto the familiar landmarks that structured Jacobean urban space. As Truewit and Daw's performances begin to suggest, wit, even in dramatic comedy's imagined places, always has a material historical context.

Though this may seem to be a fairly self-evident point, the playful, offhanded quality of witty performance often works to obscure the link between the cultural competencies that compose it and the more mundane elements of social life, especially under the gaze of the tasteful literary critic. Jonas Barish, for example, a deeply skilled and evocative close reader of Jonson's work, argues that Truewit's multiple rhetorical positions make him resemble "a disembodied intelligence flickering over the action" of *Epicoene*, "lighting up its dark corners."[16] Here, comic wit is figured as a sort of will-o'-the-wisp: visible, powerful, but without substance. Thomas Fujimora's influential engagement with the term in *The Restoration Comedy of Wit* likewise suggests that the "scope and nebulousness of wit indicate … the complexity of the comedy which embodies this intellectual idea."[17] The meanings of "embodiment" are strictly

metaphorical for Fujimora, who maintains that wit "has to do with ideas and words rather than people and action."[18] It is separate, conceptually, from comic drama itself, in that it is immaterial and "preserves its aesthetic character" regardless of context.

I am arguing here for a very different understanding of wit's places in comedy and in the world at large. The linguistic acrobatics, the satirical visions of human desire and intrigue, and the humiliations and expulsions that mark off "wit" on the early modern stage do more than confirm the talents or pretensions of the playwrights who create them and the audience members who appreciate them. They can reinforce and disguise other kinds of uneven relationships that we would do well to acknowledge. The cultural sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who sits on the opposite end of a theoretical spectrum from Barish and Fujimora, sees wit and tastefulness as materially determined phenomena: "[t]he ideology of natural taste owes its plausibility and its efficacy to the fact that, like all the ideological strategies generated in the everyday class struggle, it *naturalizes* real differences."[19] These "real differences," for Bourdieu, are always economic: the flow or "distribution of symbolic capital" masks the distribution of "legitimate capital" so that "the balance-sheet of a power relation" is misrecognized as differences in taste.[20] Wit, in other words, masks and renders palatable social relationships that are considerably less than playful. We should be wary of Bourdieu's economic determinism, but the terms of his argument are evocative nonetheless.[21] What does wit in early modern comedy hide, and why? What economic and political relationships does it compete with, reinforce, or reveal? The set of answers I propose to these questions in what follows depends upon the asking and answering of one more question, a question that melds comic form's social and literary history into a single subject of inquiry: what, to be as direct as possible, is wit made out of by Jonson, by Shakespeare, and by the other comic prodigies of Tudor and Stuart England?

FORM AND HISTORY

The organizing premise of this book is that dramatic comedy's formal reliance on the distances between competency and incompetence can best be explained by keeping wit's materiality in mind. This is not, in and of itself, a limiting thesis. A boggling variety of objects, spaces, and aptitudes were put to use as matrices for wit in early modern England, both on- and offstage. A few of the featured elements in the play-readings that follow include a saw-pit, an oak tree, books of poetry, Horace, horse

races, the potential bodily and social postures in which to buy and sell things, a new piazza in the Earl of Bedford's former backyard off the Strand, roasted pork, and prostitution. If this list seems a bit ridiculous, it should. Tudor and Stuart comedies return again and again to a ridiculous profusion of spaces and materials that appeared or were newly revalued in and around London during a period of unprecedented demographic, commercial, and physical expansion.[22] These interlocking patterns of growth and the new modes of social distinction that they made possible encouraged any number of playful explanations and experimentation in ballads, verse satires, courtesy manuals, books of Theophrastan character sketches, and other printed matter. I'll discuss these developments later in this introduction. But dramatic comedy's long-standing engagements with staging cleverness and its absence – and drama's peculiar status as a spatial medium – made it the period's most fruitful genre for investigating the interplay of wit and the world at large.

In order to isolate these observations in local contexts, and in order to set boundaries on what is clearly an expansive subject, I follow the lead of Jonson, Shakespeare, Shirley, and their fellow playwrights and turn to an examination of "place."[23] Each of the following chapters explores the complex social contests that motivate wit in historical sites and in the comic versions of them produced onstage: the royal forest of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* in Chapter 1; the emerging West End and Farringdon Extra in Ben Jonson's plays in Chapter 2; and, in Chapters 3 and 4, the Covent Garden piazza and Hyde Park, crucial sites for a consolidating fashionable Town culture in the 1630s. The roughly chronological order followed by the chapters hews to the uneven, but generally consistent, transitions in the topographical and social interests of comedy itself over the course of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, moving from the courtly, quasi-pastoral, and explicitly political engagements of Elizabethan comedy's green world, to the commercial obsessions of Jacobean city plays, to the refined and refining visions of West End tastefulness and leisure in Caroline drama.[24] Through the technological and textual forms of the theater, each of the comedies of place I read here examines the materiality and social logic of wit in a local context. At the same time, each reflects on the ways in which cultural aptitudes cut across political and economic relationships bound to the sites reimagined onstage. While we may think of forests and fairgrounds as rather straightforward settings for plays, the locations of early modern dramatic comedy were often objects of struggle over their utility, value, and ownership, both onstage and off. Comic

wit – and the place-based competencies that enable it – emerges as ambiguities of public use are reckoned with onstage.

I focus on six emblematic plays in this book – *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Bartholomew Fair*, *Epicoene*, *Covent Garden*, *The Weeding of Covent Garden*, and *Hyde Park* – but they are only a fraction of the comedies from the period with explicitly local interests, a category of play that has received an increasing amount of attention from literary critics and cultural historians in recent years.[25] This burst of interest is unsurprising, given the intensity with which these plays imagine comic spaces of conflict and attenuated resolution that shed light on social, economic, and political struggles of the day. But while recent criticism has done an excellent job of identifying the extent and interests of theatrical representations of locality – especially in an urban context – we might begin to think more carefully about the broader developmental relationship between comic form, the kinds of wit and witlessness that sit at its heart, and setting. Over time, comedy's intense engagement with the spaces and aptitudes it explores and satirizes changes the genre itself. A royal forest, in other words, or a brand new piazza, make available particular social resources for the plots of comic drama, resources that in turn can open up into new kinds of theater.[26] The shifting, overlapping modes of wit I explore in this book – domestic, linguistic, and forested practicality in Shakespeare's green world; commercial ingenuity and tastefulness in Jonson's city comedies; and cultural fluency in more recognizably elitist forms of fashion and civility in Caroline Town comedy – are matched by shifting, overlapping enactments of comic form itself. Thus, though my exploration here is limited by a traditional disciplinary boundary between pre- and post-Civil War drama, the story of wit's materials and developments in comic drama might easily be extended forward, into the Restoration and beyond.

I have suggested that the social distance separating competent and incompetent characters, the wits and the witless, is a stable, definitive convention of comedy: a structural or formal resource, in other words, that in its inevitability may seem to be disconnected from the historical contexts that give rise to it. But form is never an entirely abstract quantity. In Raymond Williams' crystallizing terms, textual conventions are "active responses … ways of organizing a way of seeing the world," shared, constructive, and ultimately mutable notions of cultural propriety and possibility for authors and audiences alike.[27] With this in mind, the play-readings in this book repeatedly reach across categorical boundaries

modern scholars have built up between different kinds of Elizabethan, Jacobean, and Caroline comedy to home in on the ways shared resources of the genre – marriage plots, providential coincidences, motions to and from a quasi-pastoral "green world," and sexual or romantic conflicts based on competing visions of social status among them – shape drama's engagements with the versions of wittiness it reconstructs and often ridicules.[28] I read, in other words, with a historicist's eye on the iterable, definitive practices of comic form – practices both textual and performative that precede genre, as Henry Turner has suggested, but that in patterned expression make dramatic comedy knowable as such.[29] This reading strategy necessarily entails more than a descriptive literary history that charts the rise and fall of particular conventions.[30] I think of formal elements of plot, character, language, and scene neither as passive attributes of a given play nor as ephemeral ideals against which the quality of individual texts might be assessed but rather as signs and practiced-upon objects that structure the *utility* of text and culture. As I read form for its local uses, it should become clear from chapter to chapter that what Michael McKeon has called "the dense network of conventionality" that composes genre is both an offshoot and a structuring principle of wit itself, a method of classification that incorporates its users into a cultural field of tastes and practices defined by and transforming a generic system.[31] Comic form, in other words, not only shapes the theatrical visions of the social relations under investigation in this book, *it is also a practiced version of those relations*.[32] As an amalgamation of event, character, language, image, and setting, the comedy of Shakespeare, Jonson, Shirley, and their contemporaries represented for its audiences competing competencies as crucial mediators of social power; as a set of conventional practices engaged with and performed within urban places, those comedies became part of the historical conditions that characterized the material diversification of wit in the first place, and that interpellated a growing audience into the social relations structured by it.[33]

These social relations were in no way limited to the questions of elite urbanity that characterize London-set comedy from the 1630s through to the end of the seventeenth century. The first chapter of this book focuses on the many uses of a royal forest and the comic convention of the quasi-pastoral setting, and the second, in part, on legal and comic representations of a commercial space filled with every kind of person imaginable. As I will explain in more detail in these earlier chapters, wit is never the sole preserve of the wealthy, and it permits status to accrue with groups or individuals – women, servants, the untitled or unmoneyed – normally