

Performance and the “Holy Purse”: Ben Jonson’s Attack on Puritan Value(s)

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Ben Jonson’s antagonism toward the early modern “Puritans” is well documented.¹ Mocking asides and satirical characterizations discrediting Puritanism abound in his drama, and scholars from Anne Barton to Jonathan Haynes have charted the political, economic, and cultural factors that shaped Jonson’s hostility.² Jonson’s extensive use of contractual and economic imagery is equally well known and has been investigated by Julie Sanders and Kate McLuskie, among others; Sanders and McLuskie conclude that Jonson was responding to the commercialization of the public theaters.³ By treating such features as discrete themes, however, recent scholarship has largely obscured a striking development in Jonson’s thinking. As he reacted to seventeenth-century antitheatricalism, Jonson sought to redefine theatrical value, appropriating the economic metaphors of contemporary Puritan preaching to proselytize on behalf of the theater against her enemies. In this way, he reframed the contest between Puritan antitheatricalism and theatrical value in terms of marketplace profitability, contrasting the barren sterility that the former purportedly imposed with the

1. While “Puritan” was an offensive epithet, a catchall phrase for attacking diverse radical sects, the term came readily to Jonson’s pen. He uses the exact term in *The Case Is Altered* and *The Devils Entertainment*, and the roughly equivalent “precisian” in works such as *Every Man in His Humour*.

2. Anne Barton, *Ben Jonson, Dramatist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Jonathan Haynes, *The Social Relations of Jonson’s Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

3. Julie Sanders, *Ben Jonson’s Theatrical Republics* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998); Kate McLuskie, “Making and Buying: Ben Jonson and the Commercial Theatre Audience,” in *Refashioning Ben Jonson: Gender, Politics, and the Jonsonian Canon*, ed. Julie Sanders, Kate Chedgzoy, and Susan Wiseman (New York: St. Martin’s, 1998), 134–54. Such recent scholarship tends to underestimate the extent to which Jonson’s antagonism toward Puritan antitheatricalism led him to champion the commercial theater in his dramatic writings, despite his own reservations.

productive exchange of values that the playhouses (in his model) facilitated. Contrasts between economic stagnation and circulation pervade his dramatic writings. Such commercialized conflicts acquire implicit spiritual and ideological connotations, as Jonson, perhaps surprisingly, prioritizes the relative discursive freedom that he seems to associate with the theater over restrictive sectarianism. Thus, when Jonson attacks the Puritans and their economically framed “faith” in his drama, we see him developing a new, rival model of theatrical value.

The outspoken antagonism of Puritan preachers and polemicists toward the early modern theater is well known. While not all extreme Protestants shared these opinions,⁴ Jonson’s plays conflate the categories of antitheatricalist and Puritan to the extent that they are virtually indistinguishable; a logical conclusion for a professional dramatist, since even Puritan ministers who were not antagonistic to drama in principle usually attacked the commercial playhouses. Denouncing the theaters as “Churches of Satan,” preachers complained that the playing companies were stealing their custom by tempting men and women to watch plays rather than attend sermons.⁵ Conversely, Puritan denunciations of the theater, and instructions to the godly not to frequent playhouses, directly threatened the players’ income: in 1603, for instance, James I banned Sunday performances following accusations that London’s citizens were “flocking and ru[n]ning to Theaters’, leaving ‘the church of God . . . bare & emptie.”⁶ Leah Marcus interprets Jonson’s *Bartholomew Fair* (1614) as a contribution to the ongoing debate about Sabbath observance,⁷ which cast playhouses as the economic and spiritual rivals of the (often Puritan) preachers.

As this competition for custom suggests, early modern commentators were aware that the seemingly rigid divides between Puritan preaching and theatrical show were worryingly fluid. Thus Jonson, in a pungent epigram, accuses preachers of employing the theatrical methods they claim to abhor:

I cannot think there’s that antipathy
 ’Twixt Puritans and players as some cry;
 Though Lippe, at Paul’s, ran from his text away
 To inveigh ’gainst plays, what did he then but play?⁸

4. See Margot Heinemann, *Puritanism and Theatre: Thomas Middleton and Opposition Drama under the Early Stuarts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 27.

5. *Ibid.*, 30–33; Francis Rous, *The diseases of the time, attended by their remedies* (London: printed by William Stansby for John Parker, 1622; STC [2nd ed.] 21340), P2v.

6. Phillip Stubbes, *The anatomie of abuses* (London: printed by [John Kingston for] Richard Jones, 1583; STC [2nd ed.] 23376), L8r.

7. Leah Marcus, *The Politics of Mirth: Jonson, Herrick, Milton, Marvell, and the Defense of Old Holiday Pastimes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 49–51.

8. Ben Jonson, “75. On Lippe, The Teacher,” in *Ben Jonson: Poems*, ed. Ian Donaldson (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 40.

In *Epicœne*, Jonson further suggests that Puritans trade performances of piety for commercial profit. In act 2, for example, True-wit describes how the "precise" Puritan woman will force her husband to "feast all the silenced brethren, once in three days . . . and hear long-winded exercises, singings, and catechizings, which you are not given to and yet must give for, to please the zealous matron your wife, who for the holy cause will cozen you, over and above (*Epicœne*, 2.2.66–71).⁹

True-wit's model of relentless consumption powered by "holy" deceit is central to Jonson's fictional assault on Puritanism, as is the almost theatrical nature of the imagined wife's methods. Like the con artists of Jonson's comedies, these hypocritical Puritans "cozen" their hapless host with staged vocal performances, belying their public identity as "silenced brethren." Yet, whereas Jonson's tricksters commonly sell expensive but enjoyable illusions, the victim of Puritan deceit suffers even as he is fleeced: he funds a "long-winded" and tiresome show which he is "not given to, and yet must give for."

As this passage demonstrates, early modern dramatists were as alert as contemporary preachers to the potential interchangeability of the playhouse and the Puritan pulpit. Patrick Collinson famously claimed that it was the playwrights, not the ministers, who invented the popularized *idea* of "Puritanism"; Peter Lake recently described Jonson's drama as the best example of this "fatal embrace linking the theatre to the puritan pulpit."¹⁰ The connection also worked the other way: according to Lake, Jonson employed tactics associated with the Puritan preachers to establish his moral authority as a satiric social commentator, displaying his education through cunning rhetorical effects that constituted a kind of cultural capital.¹¹ Robert Watson offers a more extreme interpretation, provocatively arguing that Jonson, who mocks contemporary dramatic practices in *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*, had "become of the Puritans' party without knowing it, an unwitting witness for the prosecution."¹²

There are certainly tensions in Jonson's attitude toward the commercial theater he wrote for. On the whole, however, his Jacobean comedies consistently seek to distinguish the entertaining, redemptive fictions of his own drama from

9. Ben Jonson, *Epicœne*, in *The Yale Ben Jonson*, ed. Edward Partridge (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1971).

10. Patrick Collinson, "Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair*: The Theatre Constructs Puritanism," in *The Theatrical City: Culture, Theatre and Politics in London, 1576–1649.*, ed. David L. Smith, Richard Strier, and David Bevington (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 157–69; Peter Lake and Michael Questier, *The Antichrist's Lewd Hat: Protestants, Papists and Players in Post-Reformation England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 579.

11. Lake and Questier, *The Antichrist's Lewd Hat*, 590–91.

12. Robert N. Watson, *Ben Jonson's Parodic Strategy: Literary Imperialism in the Comedies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 140.

hypocritical Puritan posturing. Jeffrey Knapp suggests that a comparable desire for such ideological distance led various early modern authors to celebrate the playhouse as an inclusive, universal “church,” accessible to all.¹³ Yet Jonson’s engagement is at once more immediate and more anxiety-inducing than Knapp’s rather diffuse allusions to collective identity might imply. Jonson is too aware of the affinity between Puritan show and dramatic performance to casually dismiss the former, while his own imagining of inclusivity seems warily alert to potential comparisons between the separatist church community and a selective, fee-paying audience. Instead, Jonson’s drama interrogates the respective profits generated through membership of these rival communities, contesting the value of Puritanism in the characteristic idiom of extreme Protestant preachers. Appropriating the Puritan tendency to couch spiritual lessons in economic terms, Jonson asserted the linguistic and performative ascendancy of his theater by demonstrating its superior ability to generate material and metaphysical “profit.”

The prevalence of financial terminology in seventeenth-century Puritan sermons was familiar to Jonson and his contemporaries. In his seminal work on the topic, Max Weber contends that the commercialized discourse of early modern Puritanism effectively allowed believers “to acquire through bargaining’ their own salvation.”¹⁴ Although Weber probably overstates the extent to which salvation became an interactive transaction in everyday life, he crucially identifies a perceived correlation between the systematic pursuit of wealth and the all-important promise of salvation.¹⁵ This connection manifested concretely in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Puritan sermons, in which new metaphors likening spiritual wealth to financial profit complemented a more conventional deployment of commercially inflected biblical rhetoric. Thus, early modern Puritan divines compared the Calvinist economy of grace and salvation to a business contract, invoking biblical parallels that compared the devout individual to the merchant (Matt. 13:45; Prov. 22:23); explained doctrinal tenets in terms of financial pledges; and characterized God as a debtor obliged by the terms of Christ’s sacrifice to discharge the spiritual liabilities of the elect.¹⁶ For example, in 1579, the extreme Protestant William Perkins likened the covenant

13. Jeffrey Knapp, *Shakespeare’s Tribe: Church, Nation and Theatre in Renaissance England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), esp. 1–20.

14. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. and ed. Stephen Kalberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 207n117.

15. *Ibid.*, xxxiii.

16. David Zaret, *The Heavenly Contract: Ideology and Organization in Pre-Revolutionary Puritanism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 194; 5, 174–79.

of grace to the bequeathing or trading of property: "Christ, as he is mediator, is given to every believer as really and truly as land is given from man to man; and with him are given all things that concern salvation, they being made ours by God's free gift, among which is Christ his righteousness."¹⁷ Such analogies, however, potentially exacerbated tensions that were already inherent in Puritan discourse, with the perceived interchangeability of pulpit and theater mirrored by Puritanism's relationship to the marketplace. While Puritan clerics co-opted commercial similes for spiritual gain, seventeenth-century merchants adopted the evaluative vocabulary of Protestant faith; consequently, as Helen Ostovich notes, the divisions between economic and spiritual categories of profit became increasingly porous in Jacobean England.¹⁸ Such tensions were ripe for exploitation by a skilled satirist such as Ben Jonson, seeking to discredit the rival claims of Puritanism and elevate the status of his commercial theater.

Within the fictional sphere of Jonson's drama, commercial and religious categories of profit regularly collide, as hypocritical Puritans aim to translate the ostensibly spiritual values of their faith into concrete wealth through a series of performances. The rich widow Dame Purecraft is introduced by her son-in-law as "a most elect hypocrite, and has maintain'd us all this seven year with it, like gentlefolks" (*Bartholomew Fair*, 1.5.160–62).¹⁹ Here Jonson parodies the Puritan ideal of vocational work, whereby material accumulation might signify divine favor and "elect" status, through the literally profitable actions of characters such as Purecraft.²⁰ Yet Jonson's drama places such Puritan showmanship in opposition to an alternative model of performative endeavor, which is likewise filtered through an economic idiom of contracts, debts, and profit. This method is especially prominent in the Jacobean comedies *The Alchemist* and *Bartholomew Fair*, which bring wealthy Puritan frauds, including Brother Tribulation and Dame Purecraft, into conflict with highly theatrical cozeners such as Subtle, Doll, and Ezekiel Edgworth. As the latter deprive Jonson's Puritans of their accumulated capital, the dramatist appropriates the characteristic Puritan idiom of "economic" salvation to provide the interpretation; Puritanism is derided as stagnant and barren, while the tricksters' version of theater provides an enjoyable and profitable alternative.

17. William Perkins, "A Reformed Catholic, or A Declaration Showing How Near We May Come to the Present Church of Rome," in *The Work of William Perkins*, ed. Ian Breward, 3 vols. (Abingdon: Sutton Courtenay Press, 1969), 3:513–78, at 532.

18. Ben Jonson, *Four Comedies*, ed. Helen Ostovich (London: Longman, 1997), 33.

19. Ben Jonson, *Bartholomew Fair*, ed. E. A. Horsman (London: Methuen & Co., 1960). The Revels Plays. All future quotations are from this edition.

20. See Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, xxxiii, 63.

THE ALCHEMIST: BRINGING THE BRETHREN INTO CIRCULATION

The premise that Puritan zealotry is inimical to economic and spiritual profit, and must be reassimilated by the theater, guides Jonson's depiction of the Anabaptists Tribulation and Ananias in *The Alchemist*. This comedy, Jonson's earliest undisguised exposure of Puritan foibles on the public stage,²¹ places particular emphasis on the hypocritical exploitation of religion for material gain. His fictional brethren are notorious for their avaricious interpretation of the ostensibly spiritual principles of "Christian gaining" and "lawful prospering,"²² while the play is set within a locale shaped by the conjunction of Puritanism and mercantile activity. Jonson's tricksters Subtle, Face, and Doll peddle their illusory get-rich-quick schemes in London's Blackfriars district: home not only to the playhouse where Jonson's comedy was first performed, but also to many Puritan merchants. The latter's trade in luxury goods such as feathers and tobacco was enhanced by the local theater, which drew the wealthy and fashionable to their doorsteps. Yet players and Puritans still vied for custom, and the economic competition that Jonson reproduces within *The Alchemist* would have been familiar to his Blackfriars spectators. Jonson, casually mocking the hypocrisy of Puritan merchants who trade in the very luxury items they ostensibly deplore, indirectly alludes to such real-life rivalry in *The Alchemist*. Thus Doll exploits Face and Subtle's shared antagonism toward their Puritan neighbors to reconcile her estranged partners-in-show:

Shall we go make

A sort of sober, scurvy, precise neighbours,

(That scarce have smil'd twice, sin' the king came in)

A feast of laughter, at our follies?

(*The Alchemist*, I.I.I.163–66)²³

Reference to their Puritan rivals also provides the means to discredit Face, who is derided by Doll as "a whoreson, upstart, apocryphal captain, / Whom not a puritan in Blackfriars will trust / So much, as for a feather!" (I.I.I.127–29).

Doll's statement questions Face's value to the "venture tripartite" (I.I.I.135), by implying that his public credit has been compromised. Yet in *The Alchemist*, more profit is garnered by the disguised butler Face, who successfully

21. Ben Jonson, *Works*, ed. C. H. Herford and Percy Simpson, II vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1925), 2:105.

22. See Jeanette D. Ferreira-Ross, "Jonson's Satire of Puritanism in *The Alchemist*," *Sydney Studies in English* 17 (1991): 34; see also Watson, *Jonson's Parodic Strategy*, 120; Cyrus Hoy, "The Pretended Piety of Jonson's *Alchemist*," *Renaissance Papers* (1957): 15–19, at 18.

23. Ben Jonson, *The Alchemist*, ed. F. H. Mares (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1967). The Revels Plays. All future quotations are from this edition.

trades on his tarnished reputation, than by the Puritans who refused to extend him credit, but are nonetheless mocked for their credulity in the play's final moments. Their closing loss of status, which contrasts with Face's rehabilitation, perhaps penalizes their initial refusal to underwrite the "apocryphal" Captain's performance. This refusal is certainly noteworthy. Whereas Jonson's triumvirate of con artists rely on a constantly revolving system in which goods are sold to multiple buyers simultaneously, and the credit model of endlessly deferred gratification is everything, Doll's simulated Puritan merchants will not participate in this trading carousel. While such caution provides protection from Face's depredations, it also hints at a barren economy which contrasts with the vitality of Subtle, Doll, and Face's lucrative, and ever-expanding, performances. Moreover, the merchants' reluctance to risk their hoarded wealth complements Jonson's sustained satire of Puritan venality. Although preachers stressed that wealth was an *unintended* consequence of elect status, denouncing the sin of covetousness,²⁴ Jonson's fictional Puritans deliberately accumulate wealth and withhold it from circulation. Such economic stockpiling is linked to religious sectarianism: as members of a separatist Church, these "precise" Puritans hold their gold and goods apart from the communal marketplace, hindering the free play of financial speculation that drives Jonson's comedy (1.1.164). Thus, in *The Alchemist*, Jonson parodies the commercial idiom of Puritan preaching, with its analogies between faith and financial endeavor, to posit a correlation between Puritan separatism and the economic stagnation that their restrictive trading practices will ultimately induce.

In contrast to the cautious Puritans of London's Blackfriars (except perhaps Druggier, a local tobacconist with sectarian tendencies²⁵), the foreign Anabaptists Tribulation and Ananias prove susceptible to Subtle and Face's wiles. Their comparative readiness to engage in speculation, investing the accumulated wealth of their Amsterdam brethren, may hint at Jonson's alertness to the nuances within contemporary stereotypes of Puritanism. Whereas the English Puritans' reluctance to extend credit might have struck a chord with Jonson's Blackfriars spectators, the Anabaptists were popularly associated in England with John of Leyden, and his ill-fated efforts to found a republic based on communal ownership. Jonson invokes this precedent in *The Alchemist*, in which his "brace of little John Leydens" (3.3.24) has access to the communal "holy purse" of their exiled brethren (3.2.140).

24. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, xxxvii.

25. Druggier's occupation suggests possible Puritan associations that are reinforced when Lowewit casually identifies him as a "Harry Nicholas" (5.5.117), or member of the Family of Love; Familists as well as Anabaptists were regularly termed "Puritans" in Jacobean polemic, perhaps in acknowledgment of their shared separatist agenda.

The “Leyden” model of shared ownership is arguably reminiscent of the “republican” alliance between Jonson’s tricksters (I.I.II.O), again registering a problematic correspondence between theatrical value and Puritanism. As Jonson is careful to demonstrate, however, Anabaptist stockpiling is at odds with the loosely “capitalist” system of competitive exchange championed by the con artists, who consistently identify as sharers in a divided profit (even, eventually, abandoning all pretense of cooperation). The latter’s retention of individual stakes is reminiscent, albeit provocatively, of the shareholders who own the Blackfriars playhouse; implicitly, by extension, the playing company’s trading mechanisms outperform those used by the Anabaptists. Moreover, it becomes apparent that the shared “holy purse” which funds *Tribulation and Ananias*’s schemes is less compatible with genuine ideals of communality than the money-spinning speculation of Jonson’s con artists. This distinction is particularly evident in their respective trading strategies. While *Doll*, *Subtle*, and *Face* welcome a broad cross section of London’s inhabitants into their schemes, the Anabaptists engage in unequal and exclusive practices. Thus *Ananias*, dealing with *Subtle* for items described as “orphans’ goods,” queries, “Were the orphans’ parents / Sincere professors?” (2.5.56–57): he would “deal justly” with the children of fellow Puritans, but will happily “cozen” anyone outside his sect (2.5.58). Such divisive and differentiated patterns of trading associate Jonson’s Anabaptists with restrictive sectarianism; as Peter Lake suggests, Jonson perceives the Puritan congregation as “an anti-society, a community only in name,” which takes without giving.²⁶ Similarly, *Ananias* is disinclined to fund the alchemical experiments of a man who does not belong to his sect, describing the “Doctor” *Subtle* as a “heathen” (3.I.5). The brethren’s reluctance to “venture any more, / Till they may see projection” also hints at the Anabaptists’ hoarding of wealth (2.5.64–66). By refusing to trust in an immaterial future profit, *Ananias* and his brethren threaten the speculative trading model of the play’s theatrical tricksters, in which illusions (or delusions) are bought with hard currency. Jonson’s Puritan characters become profitable, both for the con artists and in terms of audience entertainment, only *after* they have been tricked into active participation by the performers *Subtle* and *Face*.

As the episode of the orphans’ goods suggests, *Ananias* spearheads Jonson’s portrayal of the Anabaptists as an impediment to the tricksters’ money-making schemes (and, by implication, the theatrical experience available to Jonson’s audiences). As deacon of the Anabaptist church in Amsterdam, *Ananias* employs pious rhetoric for financial advantage; yet he epitomizes the spiritual and economic sterility of Puritanism. His introduction to the audience establishes these

26. Lake and Questier, *The Antichrist’s Lewd Hat*, 597.

dual qualities: Doll, sighting him from the window, remarks that he "looks like a gold-end man" (2.4.21). The allusion to goldsmiths, a common target of mockery in Jacobean city comedy, draws attention again to the incongruous involvement of Puritan merchants in the luxury goods trade, which contemporaries cited as evidence of hypocrisy. Moreover, while the manufacturing goldsmith might evoke a proto-capitalist image of coined and circulating wealth, Ananias is explicitly identified as a "gold-end man." The term can still denote a goldsmith, as in *Eastward Ho!*; but in the context of *The Alchemist* it establishes Ananias as an endpoint for circulation, who hinders the transactions planned by Jonson's con artists. Certainly, the implication that Ananias hoards gold rather than allowing it to circulate is aptly complemented by scriptural associations; the biblical Ananias, as Jonson's original audiences might have known, was notorious for secretly reserving the profit from a sale rather than sharing his wealth (Acts 5:1-3).

Such indications are reinforced by Ananias's membership of an exiled separatist community, which implies that his gold will be stockpiled overseas, useless to the London market. This stagnant model of hoarded wealth is then mirrored in Ananias's negative impact on the theatrical experience. As the Puritan "botcher" places obstacles in the path of Jonson's con artists, he not only hinders the smooth transactional exchange of cash for illusions, but also disrupts the unfolding of Jonson's comic plot. He is loudly averse to funding Subtle's alchemical project, arguing that "the sanctified cause/Should have a sanctified course" (3.1.5, 13-14). Tribulation overrules him, but Ananias continues to interrupt the performances staged by Jonson's tricksters; his persistent knocking at the door punctuates their subsequent deceptions. Ananias's troublesome presence may in part be a commentary on the aggressive antitheatricalism of London's real-life Puritans and the challenge they posed for the players staging Jonson's dramas. It simultaneously hints that Puritanism is an obstacle to communal interaction, and the material (and perhaps moral) profit promised by the latter.

Ananias's brusque interference with such transactions culminates in an attempt at economic and spiritual segregation: correctly suspecting Subtle of misappropriation, Ananias determines to "bear away the portion of the righteous, / Out of this den of thieves" (5.5.92-93). Uniting terms of spiritual entitlement with financial activity, and speaking in a repetitive and pseudo-scriptural style that may parody contemporary Puritan preaching,²⁷ Jonson's Anabaptist reverts to a static economic model whereby wealth is fixed in "portion"; he assumes that

27. Lake posits a connection between Ananias's characteristic language and Phillip Stubbes's antitheatrical tract *The Anatomy of Abuses* (1583), arguing that Ananias's references to starch as "an idol" (3.2.83) and his denunciations of Kastrel's "superstitious" breeches and "ruff of pride" (4.7.49-55) satirize Stubbes's emphasis on sartorial taboos. *Ibid.*, 584.

since the brethren brought a certain quantity of money to the house in Blackfriars, they are entitled to withdraw the same amount. Whereas characters such as Dapper and Mammon long for a golden world in which wealth will cascade freely through their fingers, Ananias dreams of economic containment, with coins resting “dormant.” This financial model also recalls his separatist church, with its closed, numbered community; Ananias imagines that both can be literally insulated from corrupting influences. His subnarrative of a contractually determined community of the elect, possessing the “seal” of God’s holy covenant, is especially telling in this regard:

Thou profane man. I ask thee, with what conscience
 Thou canst advance that idol, against us,
 That have the seal? Were not the shillings number’d
 That made the pounds? Were not the pounds told out,
 Upon the second day of the fourth week,
 In the eight month, upon the table dormant,
 The year, of the last patience of the saints,
 Six hundred and ten?

(*The Alchemist*, 5.5.98–105)

Ananias’s aggressively separatist principles are almost directly counter to the quasi-capitalist dream of venture capital and risky speculation peddled by Subtle, Doll, and Face.²⁸ During the course of *The Alchemist*, however, Jonson’s tricksters are able to gradually bring Ananias’s superior round to their way of thinking, dazzling Pastor Tribulation with visions of future wealth and worldly success. These highly theatrical con artists rely on illusory show to transform the initially unprofitable Anabaptists into a rich source of income. However, their efforts underline how much they have in common with the Puritan brethren, allowing Jonson’s audience to recognize the Anabaptists as direct rivals to the cozening tricksters. Thus Subtle, appealing to the pragmatic Tribulation, elaborates on the deceptions currently practiced by the Anabaptists and concludes that, with the philosopher’s stone, they will no longer need to use “your holy vizard, to win widows / To give you legacies; or make zealous wives / To rob their husbands, for the common cause” (3.2.69–71). Other techniques that will be abandoned include the Anabaptists’ dry and unpalatable vocal performances, recalling the real-life rivalry between Puritan preaching and Jonson’s theater: “You may . . . leave off to make / Long-winded exercises; or suck up / Your ha,

28. See Hoy, “Pretended Piety of Jonson’s *Alchemist*,” 15–19; Haynes, *Social Relations of Jonson’s Theatre*, 112.

and hum, in a tune" (3.2.53–55). Jonson's drama implies that even Puritan anti-theatricalism is hypocritical and motivated by venal considerations: Subtle notes that the Anabaptists "rail against plays, to please the alderman, / Whose daily custard you devour" (3.2.89–90).²⁹

Tribulation makes no effort to refute Subtle's assumption that he and his coreligionists employ outward shows of piety for financial gain. On the contrary, he confirms that such methods are

Ways, that the godly brethren have invented,
For propagation of the glorious cause,
As very notable means, and whereby, also,
Themselves grow soon, and profitably famous.

(*The Alchemist*, 3.2.98–101)

Phrases such as "propagation" and "profitably" identify Anabaptist rituals as a deliberate financial strategy, subverting the passage's ostensible rhetoric of spiritual advancement. As when Subtle enumerated the advantages of the philosopher's stone earlier in the scene, his onstage Anabaptist audience is oblivious to the higher aspirations of alchemy; Tribulation's earthbound preoccupation is that "we may be temporal lords ourselves, I take it" (3.2.52).

Tribulation's desire for imperial power, and references to "propagation" and growth, initially hint at a more expansive economic and social vision than Ananias's rigidly separatist perspective. But, while Tribulation is more flexible than his deacon, it becomes evident that he too lacks true commitment to spreading their faith. There is no hint of give-and-take in Tribulation's worldview; he dreams of conquest as accumulation, the political counterpart to Ananias's monetary hoard. He has no interest in performance for its own sake, and will be glad to retire the shows he trades for material wealth. The inherent barrenness of such Anabaptist "theater" is aptly captured by Subtle's image of the Anabaptist Pastor's congregation as "hungry hearers," thrown "scrupulous bones" (3.2.78); Jonson's Puritans participate in a contained, self-centered economy in which each individual consumes greedily, hoards gold, and leaves only dry bones for his (or her) unsatisfied audience.³⁰

Fortunately for Jonson's playhouse audiences, Subtle intervenes, transforming these dry and "godly" deceptions into profitable theater. When he persuades

29. See Lake and Questier, *The Antichrist's Lewd Hat*, 601.

30. As Herford and Simpson noted, Subtle's account of these "scrupulous bones" follows Stubbes's *Anatomy of Abuses* closely enough to suggest a deliberate parody (X, 93). See Ferreira-Ross, "Jonson's Satire of Puritanism in *The Alchemist*," 34.

Tribulation that he must speculate to accumulate, bringing the pastor's hoarded wealth back into circulation, Jonson's false alchemist simultaneously provides his play's spectators with a new source of entertainment. Subtle's cunning exploitation of their ambitions enables the Anabaptists to become a productive force; outmaneuvered by the trio of con artists, Tribulation opens the "holy purse" to the depredations of these consummate performers (3.2.17–18), thereby contributing directly to their money-making venture. Indirectly, in terms of the play's metanarrative, Tribulation's reassimilation also funds the continuation of the comedy and allows the tricksters to remain unmasked and scheming for another act.

While Jonson's tricksters take full advantage of the "holy purse," the play-text registers an underlying anxiety about their involvement with these Puritan financiers. Recognizing that the hoarded wealth of the Anabaptists is finite, Subtle introduces Tribulation and Ananias to a new form of profitable deceit: forging coins. Ananias eagerly embraces this concrete application of "alchemical" methods and readily uses sophistry to defend the dubious scheme. Responding to Tribulation's legal concerns with the Anabaptist mantra that "we know no magistrate," he also emphasizes the foreign nature of the coin and follows Subtle's lead in arguing for a linguistic distinction between "coining" and "casting" (3.2.149–54). Yet their undertaking, perhaps the most economically problematic moment in Jonson's comedy, highlights the extent to which the Anabaptists threaten the play's profitability. In contrast to Sir Epicure Mammon, who dreams of transforming lead to gold, their vision is base and prosaic; pewter is exchanged for pewter, with no sense of a higher transmutation. More money is admittedly created, but in a bastardized form, with the coinage adulterated by foreign elements; this aspect consolidates the play's earlier association of Anabaptism with sedition, since in early modern England, coining was legally defined as treason. Whereas the plots of Jonson's tricksters usually bring money into circulation by selling glorious dreams for cash, this particular episode hints that the Anabaptists sully all they come into contact with: that Puritan profit (whether economic or spiritual) can only ever be dross, base pewter.

Such anxiety that those who cannot appreciate the illusory delights peddled by the play's con artists may remain, like the Anabaptists, unable to transform, arguably lingers in the closing moments of Jonson's comedy. On the whole, the performances of Doll, Face, and Subtle have successfully transformed their Puritan rivals into a lucrative source of profit: literally, when Tribulation and Ananias shower pounds and shillings upon their enterprise; and indirectly, when Ananias discomfits their enemy Surly, becoming the inadvertent defender of theatrical illusion. The defrauding of the Anabaptists might also be considered to have a social benefit, in assimilating these separatists

back into the London community: by the end of *The Alchemist*, Tribulation and Ananias are united in shared anger with the other gulls conned by Subtle, Face, and Doll. Yet *The Alchemist* here also registers a closing reservation about the theater's reforming role. A problematic alternative remains: that these duped victims have now joined the separatist society of the Puritans, united by nothing but their newly learned distrust of performance and communal interaction. Their failure to communicate with each other directly (except when quarreling) is certainly a matter for concern, as is their banishment from the Blackfriars house in which their dreams were once staged. Moreover, Ananias at least will apparently return to Amsterdam after the play ends; if the Anabaptists are temporarily united with their fellow victims, their assimilation into London society is strictly limited by the temporal bounds of the play. This challenging possibility that Jonson's characters, having come together, are separated in the final lines is explored most fully through the experiences of the play's greatest dreamer, Sir Epicure Mammon. It is his dispute with Ananias that splinters the gulls' unified front, while his closing conversion to Millenarian preacher may even warn that those who fail to appreciate the illusions of *The Alchemist* risk degeneration into Puritan sterility.

At the start of Jonson's comedy, Mammon stands in striking contrast to Ananias and Tribulation. Whereas their goal is to further the interests of their separatist brethren (or themselves), Face reports Mammon's inclusive desire to enrich London:

Methinks I see him, entering ordinaries,
 Dispensing for the pox and plaguy houses,
 Reaching his dose; walking Moorfields for lepers;
 And off'ring citizens' wives pomander-bracelets,
 As his preservative, made of the elixir;
 Searching the spittle, to make old bawds young;
 And the highways for beggars, to make rich.
 I see no end of his labours. He will make
 Nature asham'd of her long sleep: when art,
 Who's but a stepdame, shall do more than she,
 In her best love to mankind, ever could.
 If his dream last, he'll turn the age to gold.

(*The Alchemist*, 1.4.18–29)

The sexual innuendo in this passage is comic, but it also signifies the reproductive potential of Mammon's dream. He imagines a world in which gold will accumulate and spread, in contrast to the Anabaptists' vision of strictly limited and segregated propagation. Though there are faint hints of Mammon's Puritan

inclinations in his speech patterns and his iconoclastic willingness to dismantle the churches (2.2.14–17),³¹ by act 1 he has embraced the illusions Subtle, Doll, and Face are offering more fully than any of their other victims. In fact, it may be these schemes that are responsible for reintroducing Mammon to the Puritan mores he had seemingly repudiated; Doll, seducing him in the guise of a noblewoman driven mad by Hugh Broughton's theological treatises, quotes the latter's Puritan doctrines at length (4.5.1–36). An impressionable Mammon apparently recalls such teachings at the end of the play as, humiliated and deprived of his wealth, he determines to “go mount a turnip-cart, and preach / The end o' the world, within these two months” (5.5.81–82). In his portrait of Mammon, then, Jonson may register doubts about whether any Puritan spectator or auditor can be transformed into lasting profitability by theatrical illusion. Nonetheless, all is not lost. While Mammon has apparently returned to his radical Puritan roots at the end of *The Alchemist*, his plan implicitly acknowledges the importance of inclusive trading, outlining an (admittedly ridiculous) pilgrimage that will bring salvation to the provinces. The illusory shows of Jonson's con artists may not have fully purged the Puritan tendencies of their gulls, but they have at least become temporary sharers in a communal dream; while the temporal sphere of the play holds, the social and economic separatism that trapped them in an unprofitable limbo has been undone.

While the play's gulls, and even Subtle and Doll, gain fleeting enjoyment from its illusions, the main material and theatrical benefits of the performance accrue to the Blackfriars householder Lovewit. Lovewit is another adept performer, who proves willing to disregard and then discredit his “sober” Puritan neighbors as well as the con artists' victims. Indeed, his final coup is regarded by some critics as the final ascendancy of theatrical value; Watson, for instance, argues that Lovewit emerges triumphant at the end of Jonson's play because he is even more metatheatrically aware than Doll and Subtle.³² Moreover, while Lovewit is a skilled actor, he belongs to a more socially exclusive sphere of performance and financial practice: one elevated above the criminal scheming of the con artists. As a gentlemanly spendthrift, he can be trusted to keep the wealth he has acquired in circulation; yet he is spared the taint of excessive acquisitiveness, which is displaced onto his servant Face. The distinction may offer a glimpse of Jonson seeking to reconcile his defense of theatrical value, which elevates the public playhouse above Puritan invective, with his underlying anxieties about commercial authorship. In this sense,

31. Kristen Poole, *Radical Religion from Shakespeare to Milton: Figures of Nonconformity in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 62.

32. Watson, *Ben Jonson's Parodic Strategy*, 135.

Lovewit might arguably anticipate Grace's role in *Bartholomew Fair*, as a profitable resource of the type that Haynes identifies with an aristocratic "gift" economy rather than nascent capitalism.³³ Jonson, torn between patronage and professionalism, perhaps anticipates such associations in *The Alchemist*, using Lovewit to explore ideas of inheritance and hospitable prodigality.

BARTHOLOMEW FAIR: THE TRADE IN THEATRICAL SHOW

Jonson soon revisited the themes of economic endeavor, separatism, and theatrical performance in *Bartholomew Fair*, which features his most famous stage Puritan: Zeal-of-the-Land Busy. Despite his Banbury origins, the preacher Busy has many traits in common with the Anabaptists Tribulation and Ananias. He too is introduced as a hypocrite who profits from false performances of piety; as with Tribulation and Ananias, however, such gains are threatened by Busy's selfish inability to cooperate within a communal trade network. Thus, at the start of the play, Quarlous denounces Busy as "a notable hypocritical vermin . . . One that stands upon his face more than his faith" (1.3.133–35). Quarlous, a highly successful performer, recognizes the worldly agenda that motivates Puritan performances: he warns the merchant Littlewit that, having married into a Puritan family, he should expect to "hear prayers groan'd out, over thy iron-chests, as if they were charms to break 'em" (1.3.97–99). Puritan prayer is figured by Quarlous as a destructive and superstitious force, employed in a purely materialistic context. Furthermore, Jonson's witty gallant hints that Busy's conversion to Puritanism is merely an extension of his previous corrupt "vocation": while the former baker claims to have abandoned his trade because "of a scruple he took" (1.3.120), the preceding dialogue has emphasized the material advantages of Busy's new status as Puritan prophet, which allows him to court the wealthy Dame Purecraft. Busy enjoys the literal fruits of his own courtship—Littlewit describes him as "a suitor that puts in here at meal-tide" (1.2.61)—but seems uninterested in the welfare of his fellow Puritans. In fact, rather than holding all goods in common with his brethren, this "sanctified" elder has been known to exploit the bonds of faith for financial advantage; Quarlous reports how he duped a "zealous" Puritan grocer 'that broke with him, trusted him with currants' (1.3.138–40). The anecdote further suggests that Busy, like Tribulation and Ananias before him, threatens to undermine the credit system upon which London's trade relies; he distances himself not only from "profane" merchants, but even from an exchange agreement with a fellow Puritan. It seems that, like the Anabaptists, Busy favors a separatist economic

33. See Haynes, *Social Relations of Jonson's Theatre*.

model in which wealth is hoarded by the few members of an exclusive trading sphere; and, even within this closed network, prioritizes his own prosperity above all else.

Busy's antagonism to the public marketplace is especially prominent once the action of the play moves to Bartholomew Fair. Having obeyed Dame Purecraft's command to make their visit "as lawful as you can" (1.6.59–60), the Puritan elder finds himself in the position of one who (almost literally) wants to have his cake and eat it; he seeks to enjoy the fair's fleshly delights, feasting on pig in Ursula's tent, and yet at the same time to hold himself aloof from its "polluting" effect. This attitude is evident in his early speeches to Purecraft, when he concludes that "in the way of comfort to the weak, I will go, and eat. I will eat exceedingly, and prophesy" (1.6.91–92). Here, Busy's dubious reasoning relates intriguingly to Puritanism's separatist connotations, with Jonson characteristically mocking what he views as hypocrisy: thus, in an argument provocatively reminiscent of contemporary debates about outward conformity,³⁴ Busy holds that "the place is not much, not very much, we may be religious in midst of the profane, so it be eaten with a reformed mouth" (1.6.71–73). But, while Jonson's Puritan is in this sense a failed separatist, he still holds himself apart from the fair—even when he is in it. As Kristen Poole notes, *Bartholomew Fair* mockingly depicts a small band of self-styled "saints," venturing into a network of commercial and social exchange that Busy will soon recast as "the shop of Satan" and "the seat of the Beast" (3.2.40; 3.6.42–43).³⁵

Busy, like Ananias in *The Alchemist*, responds to the fair's lively commercial atmosphere with hostility and aggression. He disrupts trade at every opportunity, vilifying the wares as "apocryphal" idols (3.6.52); punctuating the stall holders' promotional cries with noisy catcalls (3.6.72–74); and physically overturning Joan Trash's gingerbread stand. His ostensibly pious assault on exchange practices that he identifies as "profane" and "popish" has been well documented by critics. While Busy's efforts to break the lines of communication between vendor and purchaser are intriguing in relation to a separatist economic ideal, however, his actions also reflect a more concrete rivalry. Since Busy is as eager as the fair traders to take advantage of the Littlewits' wealth, he views the stall holders as competitors who will deplete his source of income. Thus, exploiting the Puritan doctrine of segregation, he characterizes these traders as "popish" heathens in an effort to distance the "godly" Littlewits from

34. Lake and Questier, *The Antichrist's Lewd Hat*, 587; Perez Zagorin, *Ways of Lying: Dissimulation, Persecution, and Conformity in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 102–3.

35. Poole, *Radical Religion from Shakespeare to Milton*, 55.

their polluting wares. This physical separation is visually signaled by their characteristically Puritan appearance: their "small printed ruffs" distinguish them from the other customers of the fair, and presumably signal to the stall holders that they are unprofitable clients who, in line with Jonson's portrayals of Puritanism, can be expected to jealously hoard their wealth (3.2.112). Here, Busy deliberately obstructs the Littlewits' desire to join the transactional community of the marketplace, preserving their purses for his own depredations.

While Busy's antagonism toward the "popish" trading practices of the fair is most obviously motivated by economic considerations, Leah Marcus has shown that his hostile but inherently foolish exclamations can also be interpreted as a parody of contemporary Puritan antitheatricalism. Noting that Bartholomew Fair was a favorite venue for Puritan invective against the playhouses, she points out that Jonson's fictional fair has the same structure as his comic drama, with its own prologue, acts, and orations. Furthermore, Marcus notes that Jonson's version of Bartholomew Fair explicitly alludes to the physical Hope Theatre in which this comedy was first staged; thus, Busy's selfish and ineffectual attack on the fair becomes a parodic metatheatrical assault against Jonson's theater.³⁶ Her claim is supported by Busy's frequent use of performative terms to denigrate his competitors, which anticipates his later outspoken opposition to Leatherhead's puppet show. In act 3, for instance, Busy warns his small flock to "walk on in the middle way . . . let not your eyes be drawn aside with vanity, nor your ear with noises" (3.2.28–30); the temptations of the fair, figured visually and aurally, are suggestively akin to the attractions of Jonson's theater. Busy's attempt to enforce his exclusive right to the Littlewits' wealth through separatist rhetoric is not, then, constrictive merely in economic terms; this episode echoes the efforts made by real Puritan preachers to keep their congregations away from the playhouses.

Even more intriguingly, Busy self-consciously *scripts* his attack in a way that brings two rival modes of performance into conflict. Thus, as Robert Watson has shown, the Puritan elder boastfully misreads his physical experience as an allegorical trial, chronicling Bartholomew Fair as Vanity Fair. There are even hints that, by smashing Joan's gingerbread, he hopes to write himself into the role of Christ throwing the moneylenders from the Temple.³⁷ Busy subsequently casts himself as a religious martyr, explaining that "I am glad to be thus separated from the heathen of the land, and put apart in the stocks, for the holy cause" (4.6.80–82). However, this pose of suffering merely extends Busy's previous manipulation of the scriptures; Jonson's Puritan represents

36. Marcus, *The Politics of Mirth*, 39–44.

37. See Watson, *Ben Jonson's Parodic Strategy*, 151–53.

himself as a victim of persecution to win the wealthy Dame Purecraft's sympathy and, hopefully, her hand in marriage (4.6.114–16). Such self-interested counterfeiting reveals Busy's hypocritical reliance upon the visual and verbal showmanship that he ostensibly reviles. Moreover, Jonson's exposure of the close affinity between Busy and the Bartholomew traders indirectly discredits contemporary sermonizing against the theaters. As the fictional competitors adopt analogous performance strategies to exploit the financial resource that the Littlewits represent, *Bartholomew Fair* parodies the real-life rivalry between Jonson's theater and the Puritan preachers.

The role that language and deceitful show play in Busy's efforts to undermine the trading ethos of the fair and marry the wealthy Dame Purecraft is noteworthy. Once again, we witness a Puritan character seeking to appropriate the performative attributes of Jonson's theater to satisfy his own greed. As in *The Alchemist*, however, Jonson as playwright utilizes a range of strategies to expose the barrenness of this Puritan "theater." Thus Busy, echoing his stage predecessor Ananias, despises the unregulated trading of the fair for its accessibility to customers from any social or religious sphere, and the value placed upon immaterial qualities; as in *The Alchemist*, the "trash" on sale offers a transitory pleasure linked to festive license. Yet Busy's stale, recycled speech patterns expose his own performances as unprofitable dross, devoid even of enjoyment value. Julie Sanders has demonstrated that language is central to the fair's transactions, as it is to the play's appeal for Jonson's paying spectators;³⁸ the play-text is marked by linguistic innovation and variety, entertaining its audience with a wealth of character voices. But Busy's language is as dull and unproductive as his plotting will be: Barish notes that his speeches "contain an abnormally high percentage of devices of repetition, and it is these more than anything that give them their distinctive incantational hum."³⁹ Through the stagnation of Busy's language, Jonson exposes the limitations of this character's imagination; the Puritan elder lacks the capacity for true invention, and can only endlessly parrot the ideas of others. The emptiness of Busy's pretensions also mocks the performative skill of contemporary anti-theatricalists such as John Stubbes. Busy's authorial dependence on the fair that he attacks may even hint that, without the drama of Jonson and his contemporaries to animate their vitriolic discourse, the Puritans would be nothing.

The ultimate repudiation of Busy's barren performances, and his separatist ideals, occurs at the end of *Bartholomew Fair*. When the Puritan elder loses

38. Sanders, *Ben Jonson's Theatrical Republics*, 95–96.

39. Jonas A. Barish, *Ben Jonson and the Language of Prose Comedy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), 198.

Dame Purecraft to the more successful role player Quarlous, this episode symbolizes the triumph of regenerative theatrical experience over Busy's dried-up Puritan show. As a Puritan character who openly exploits religion for profit, however, Purecraft is also important in her own right. At first, an audience might assume that her beliefs, although misguided, are genuine: she is introduced in absentia by Win and Littlewit, who announce that she is studying with the "old elder" Busy, and relies upon his opinions (1.2.60). The impression of a gullible dupe is reinforced by Quarlous who, like Truewit in *Epi-coene*, paints an unflattering picture of the pious Puritan wife: "Dost thou ever think to bring thine ears or stomach to the patience of a dry grace, as long as thy tablecloth, and dron'd out by thy son here, that might be thy father, till all the meat o' thy board has forgot it was that day i' the kitchen? Or to brook . . . the perpetual spitting, before and after a sober drawn exhortation of six hours, whose better part was the hum-ha-hum?" (*Bartholomew Fair*, 1.3.86–97).

Quarlous follows Truewit's lead in advertising the performative qualities of Puritan worship, including an emphasis on set speeches, gesture, and song. As playwright, however, Jonson is careful to distinguish such quasi-theatrical shows from his imaginative fiction of *Bartholomew Fair*; whereas the latter's productivity is symbolized by the crude, enjoyable sensuality of Ursula's tent, the Puritans' "droned" homilies are "dry" and last too long. Quarlous's closing reference to prayers "groan'd out over thy iron-chests" (1.3.98) additionally reveals Dame Purecraft, the Littlewit matriarch, as a miser who worships money rather than spiritual treasure. Littlewit will shortly announce her role in accumulating this fortune, which, like the rest of her brethren, she guards jealously. The enclosing "iron-chests" may even recall how the would-be alchemists Tribulation and Ananias settled for pewter and iron goods; Purecraft too reduces the gold she acquires to baser metal, with her gaze (and by extension her suitor Busy's) focused on the external dross metal that contains her wealth. The passage also reinforces Jonson's prevalent association of Puritanism with sterility: the Puritan desire for gold manifests in a sexually inflected "groaning" of prayers, but these eroticized sighs are unproductively directed at stockpiled coins, separated from the exchanges of the marketplace and the fair.

Like her advisor Busy, Jonson's Puritan widow is a hypocrite who profits from feigned piety; even her name, Pure-Craft, signals her deceitful nature. The suggestion that Puritanism provides her with deceptive rhetoric to trick gold from the gullible is substantiated later in *Bartholomew Fair*, when she courts the supposed madman Trouble-All (Quarlous in disguise). Unaware of the financial possibilities Purecraft represents, Jonson's theatrical schemer reiterates his grudges against the "sanctified sisters" and their brethren (5.2.38), denouncing the Puritans as the "church-robbers of Christendom" (5.2.44–45). While his

final accusation may also allude to extreme Protestant iconoclasm, Quarlous is most preoccupied by economic abuses. His suspicions are confirmed by Dame Purecraft herself, who explains that: "These seven years, I have been a wilful holy widow only to draw feats and gifts from my entangled suitors: I am also by office, an assisting sister of the deacons, and a devourer, instead of a distributor of the alms" (*Bartholomew Fair*, 5.2.52–55).

Purecraft's confession reveals that false performances of piety play an important role in her accumulation of wealth. She states that she has played the "holy" widow for profit and, among other strategies, admits appropriating alms under the pretense of distributing them. These methods, however, are described in terms that echo the economic metaphors used by genuine seventeenth-century Puritan preachers. For instance, Purecraft's reference to confirmation in the faith potentially recalls how contemporary Puritan sermons explained the heavenly covenant between God and the elect in contractual terms (5.2.61), while her feigned interest in poor relief mimics the emphasis that real-life clerics placed upon socially useful vocational work (5.2.57). Furthermore, Jonson characterizes Purecraft's behavior as symptomatic of widespread Puritan corruption: she operates with the apparent approval of the church elders, as an "assisting sister of the deacons."

Purecraft's confession also implicates her suitor, Zeal-of-the-Land Busy. Busy's past as a cheating baker is already known to Jonson's spectators (1.3.138–40); Dame Purecraft now exposes him as "the capital knave of the land, making himself rich by being made feoffee in trust to deceased brethren, and coz'ning their heirs by swearing the absolute gift of their inheritance" (5.2.66–69). Here, Jonson appropriates the Puritan preachers' characteristic figuring of divine grace as an inheritance or "gift" willed to the elect to frame his fictional assault on their cause. Busy's indifference to the sanctity of commercial contracts suggests his lack of genuine faith, as he co-opts Puritan teachings about the credit structure of faith—that God owes a debt of salvation to the elect—to profit financially. Yet Jonson's character is not even loyal to this distorted and venal version of Puritanism. Toward the end of the play, he announces his conversion (5.5.108–10); having previously breached his contractual obligations to his fellow merchants and the heirs of deceased former brethren, Busy ends by betraying his covenant with the Puritan deity.

Jonson depicts Busy's conversion in characteristically comic fashion. Busy has recently claimed to be resolutely faithful: as part of the scripted martyrdom narrative with which he woos Purecraft, he condemns the "halting neutral" who "will not endure the heat of persecution" (4.6.107–8). An act later, however, the would-be author Busy repudiates his faith, having been swayed by the arguments of a puppet at a fairground sideshow. Here, Jonson mocks

the Puritan's inability to outface the reforming power of even the lowest type of "theater";⁴⁰ as Quarlous notes, "I know no fitter match, than a puppet to commit with an hypocrite!" (5.5.45–46). When Busy employs his "stale" antitheatrical polemic against Leatherhead's "damnable" show, his blustering claims are refuted by the puppet Dionysus's unsophisticated but telling response:

BUSY. Yes, and my main argument against you, is, that you are
an abomination: for the male, among you, putteth on the
apparel of the female, and the female of the male.

PUPPET DIONYSUS. *You lie, you lie, you lie abominably.*

COKES. Good, by my troth, he has given him the lie thrice.

PUPPET DIONYSUS. *It is your old stale argument against the players,
but it will not hold against the puppets; for we have neither
male nor female amongst us.*

(*Bartholomew Fair*, 5.5.91–98)

Having displayed his superior understanding of the mechanics of theatrical show, the puppet spokesman then asserts his quasi-spiritual authorial mastery. Appropriating the terminology associated with both contemporary Puritan prophesying and literary endeavor, he declares that "I speak by inspiration, as well as he" (5.5.103–4). Busy, outplayed at his own game of pious fraud, concedes defeat with the admission that "I am confuted, the cause hath failed me" (5.5.106).

Busy's hasty conversion from opponent to "beholder" of the puppet show complements the play's ongoing satire of Puritan hypocrisy. It also comically discredits his previous antitheatrical accusations. Perhaps, here, Jonson is getting revenge on the clerics who attacked the theater and *his* "vocation" as playwright by exposing the inadequacy of such Puritan polemic, which is powerless against even the clumsy refutations voiced by Dionysus: a puppet king in a poorly written play, who nonetheless shares a name with the Greco-Roman god of theater. Busy's conversion also enables a redemptive conclusion, in which Jonson's Puritan is integrated into the Bartholomew Fair community. No longer disrupting the fair's trading or the puppet-show performance, this former member of the "silenced" brethren falls quiet in earnest, becoming a spectator at

40. Jonson reportedly considered puppet shows a crude, vulgar imitation of scripted drama. *Ibid.*, 234.

Leatherhead's show. His reassimilation is subsequently confirmed by an invitation to Justice Overdo's feast; unlike in *The Alchemist*, the Puritan separatist's inclusion in a London-wide community is projected imaginatively beyond the play's temporal sphere.

Dame Purecraft also joins the transactional and social community of the fair, through her betrothal to Quarlous. This episode, like Busy's conversion, portrays a Puritan hypocrite being outmaneuvered by a more skillful performer.⁴¹ Purecraft's downfall can similarly be traced to character traits revealed at the start of *Bartholomew Fair*. Thus her daughter Win announces that "my mother has had her nativity-water cast lately by the cunning men in Cow-lane, and they ha' told her her fortune, and do ensure her she shall never have happy hour, unless she marry within this sen'night, and when it is, it must be a madman, they say" (*Bartholomew Fair*, 1.2.43–47). The scenario is strongly reminiscent of *The Alchemist*, and even the sometimes naïve Win recognizes the ploy; she continues, "Why, this is a confederacy, a mere piece of practice upon her, by these imposters!" (1.2.53–54). Yet Purecraft, though a successful imposter in her own right, lacks judgment as a spectator to the tricksters' astrological show, and therefore accepts their prediction as truth.

The same error lies behind her decision to court Quarlous, disclosing her financial secrets in the process. Deceived by his temporary disguise as the madman Trouble-All, the falsely pious Purecraft again falls victim to someone else's spectacle. This show, like the puppet show that was Busy's nemesis, is a less-than-perfect dramatic performance. Jonson's gallant is initially startled by the widow's overtures, only gradually realizing the valuable opportunity he has been presented with: "Why should not I marry this six thousand pound, now I think on't? And a good trade too, that she has beside, ha? . . . Here I may make myself some saver" (*Bartholomew Fair*, 5.2.76–79). Yet, as with Dionysus's defeat of Busy, Quarlous's subsequent success appears almost effortless: casually, he describes his triumphant wooing as a chance to "make myself some saver." Thus Jonson, ridiculing the inferiority of false Puritan show to even the lowest amateur performance, discredits these characters' efforts to appropriate theatrical resources for their own hypocritical ends. His Puritans may be pious frauds, but as spectators they lack discernment and critical judgment.⁴²

Jonson's engagement with Puritan values in *Bartholomew Fair* goes beyond a simple exposé of Puritans as money-grabbing hypocrites. By exploiting recent

41. A similar argument is made by Robert Watson, although he views Dame Purecraft as entirely foolish throughout *Bartholomew Fair*. See Watson, *Ben Jonson's Parodic Strategy*, 148.

42. Leah Marcus also considers Busy a very poor reader of the texts by which he castigates others. See Marcus, *The Politics of Mirth*, 53.

rhetorical practices that blurred the distinction between spiritual and economic value, especially in the popularizing Puritan discourse that was his particular target, Jonson attacks the "profitability" of Puritan belief. In the case of Busy, for example, Jonson aligns the irregularities in Busy's commercial activities as a baker with his relatively weak adherence to his faith; by framing both in contractual terms, he questions the material and spiritual values of Busy's Puritan brand. Moreover, Busy's false piety is shown to have serious implications for social and commercial interaction, since he adheres to a separatist economic model that will not allow anyone else to acquire wealth. The traders of the fair are his rivals, in a double sense: these stall holders compete for the profitable attention of Win and Littlewit, threatening to consume the wealth (spiritual and literal) that might otherwise come to him as their religious advisor. Yet Busy does not promote a type of competition that might benefit trade by keeping coins in continuous circulation; instead, he wants to destroy his rivals and smash the marketplace to pieces, leaving himself as the only option. Thus he attempts to distance the Littlewits from rival attempts upon their commercial resources by exploiting the polemic of confessional difference: for instance, he describes the fair as a Satanic nest of popery (3.6.82–91). This is financial sectarianism at its worst, tearing down the economic edifice of interactive trade because of an ill-defined set of values that can, ultimately, be refuted by a puppet. Busy's conversion proves necessary not simply because he is a perjured hypocrite, but also so that the commercial and theatrical transactions of the fair can reach an appropriate conclusion.

The social reassimilation of the Puritans in *Bartholomew Fair* offers a more hopeful vision than that found in Jonson's earlier comedy *The Alchemist*. With Purecraft to be married and Busy repudiating Puritanism by the end of the play, these former separatists have apparently rejoined the fictional London community. The impression is reinforced by Justice Overdo's hospitable closing offer, prompted by the theatrically aware Quarlous, to feast the play's characters. As Overdo abandons his flawed attempt to police the fraudulent performances of the fair, repressive Puritan values give way to an ideal of communal reeducation through festivity.⁴³ While Jonson's spectators may suspect that this dream will not last and, indeed, never see it realized onstage, *Bartholomew Fair* offers a brief glimpse of a world in which the converted Puritan sits down to feast with the actors of Leatherhead's puppet show. Thus, while this 1614 comedy shares *The Alchemist's* characterization of Puritans as disruptive influences, who must

43. A closer parallel between Overdo's feast and the Puritan ideology of spiritual development is suggested by Peter Lake, though the linguistic echoes his argument relies upon are not necessarily unique (Lake and Questier, *The Antichrist's Lewd Hat*, 594–95).

be forcibly rendered profitable by rival theatrical entrepreneurs, Jonson's later drama displays greater faith in the theater's ability to achieve that result.

Nonetheless, the closing vision that Jonson depicts in *Bartholomew Fair* is not completely reassuring. Quarlous, who takes the lead in reassimilating Dame Purecraft into society, and inspires Overdo's inclusive festive gathering, is a problematic figure: his borderline-criminal acquisitiveness contrasts sharply with that of his rival Winwife, while his name suggests quarrelsome tendencies at odds with communal values. In this sense, Winwife proves a crucial foil. While Quarlous successfully obtains access to Purecraft's hoarded wealth, and possibly to the financial inheritance that Grace is entitled to, it is Winwife who gains Grace herself. Like Lovewit in *The Alchemist*, the aristocratic Grace arguably embodies the "gift" economy ideal of wealth. She must bestow herself exclusively upon one suitor to preserve her inherited value but, once she commits to marriage, her potential productivity exceeds that of the Puritan widow. Jonson stresses that, for the rival suitors, Grace is a superior prize: "Win-wife" is clearly labeled the victor.

Here, Jonson seems at the last to be drifting away from a model that literally equates economic and spiritual value, despite its importance in *The Alchemist* and for much of *Bartholomew Fair*. Grace's financial status may remain uncertain as the play ends, but her name anticipates a more elevated category of reward. Thus, while Jonson embraces an economic idiom of spirituality to discredit the Puritans in their own terms, celebrating the profit value of his drama in contrast to the dry sermonizing of the latter, he cannot quite disguise his anxiety about the potential conflation of such categories—within the contemporary commercial theater, as well as in the hypocritical Puritanism he depicts. Grace introduces, fleetingly, a more positive alternative, in which literal accumulation gives way to a more circumscribed but also more spiritually elevated profit. As she does so, she might almost gesture toward an alternative theatrical future: one that, in its move away from simple economic imperatives, arguably echoes Jonson's real-life concerns about writing as a professional dramatist for the commercial playhouses.⁴⁴

CONCLUSION: SEPARATISM AND THEATRICAL PROFIT

The Alchemist and *Bartholomew Fair* share an interest in and emphasis on the aggressive separatist values that Jonson attributes to Puritanism, and the threat such values pose to economic and social interaction. Busy tries to segregate his charges from the fair, hoping to maintain exclusive control over his "community" by attacking rival traders; Purecraft's own efforts to "devour"

44. See McLuskie, "Making and Buying," 134–54.

wealth are inherently barren (5.2.55), especially since she profits from contractual separations between husband and wife; while Ananias and Tribulation, even when tempted into spending, use their self-imposed exile to excuse counterfeiting and the adulteration of the coinage. In these plays, such economic dangers are linked closely to a pseudo-religious commitment to separatism, just as Puritan performances of piety are consistently exposed as selfishly venal. These accumulating individuals seek to construct an exclusive economic and theological sphere which, although confined and barren, aims to crush rather than cooperate with its rivals. Moreover, the nongenerative sterility of Puritan finances and Puritan faith is aligned by Jonson with antitheatricalism. Thus Ananias threatens the role-playing schemes of Subtle, Doll, and Face as well as their income, while Busy recognizes the puppet master Lanternhead as his competition. Jonson, in these episodes, seems to allude to the real-life competition between the Puritan ministers, performing sermons against dramatic playing, and the playhouses where his drama was staged. Within the performative confines of the Blackfriars and Hope theaters, it is the values of the latter that emerge triumphant.

In one sense, then, what Jonson offers spectators of *The Alchemist* and *Bartholomew Fair* is a fantasy in which theatrical show asserts its authority over Puritan deceit. Purecraft falls prey to the young gallant Quarlous, a typical theatergoer; Busy is "converted" by Dionysus and agrees to watch the puppet show; and Ananias and Tribulation are outwitted by three highly theatrical con artists. Theater values of renewal and regenerative laughter triumph over repressive Puritanism for the amusement of the watching audience, while Jonson's role-playing con artists profit from their miserly opponents within the fiction of the play. Ananias and Tribulation are persuaded by Subtle to engage in a series of economic transactions, bringing the coins which had laid "dormant" back into circulation; at the end of *The Alchemist* they are temporarily reintegrated into a London community, albeit of the dispossessed, as they bang at the door of Lovewit's house. In the slightly later *Bartholomew Fair*, Purecraft abandons the closed community of the "sanctified sisters" for a second marriage to a spendthrift young husband who can be relied upon to spread her wealth abroad, while Zeal-of-the-Land Busy, confuted by the puppet Dionysus, abandons his previous efforts to disrupt its commercial and carnivalesque vitality.

The Alchemist and *Bartholomew Fair* construct their assault upon and redemption of Puritanism in primarily economic terms. The underlying premise is that their Puritan characters, having accumulated wealth through false show, must release these hoarded savings back into profitable circulation: a result achieved through the interventionary power of theatrical performance. This fantasy is taken even further in Jonson's 1616 comedy *The Devil Is an Ass*. In this play, the cunning Merecraft scripts a performance for his dupe

Fitzdottrel that is explicitly modeled on the “tricks” of John Darrell, a Puritan exorcist who was exposed as a charlatan in the 1590s (5.3.1–9).⁴⁵ Merecraft also hints at the contrast between the speculative financial trading that his feigned performances enable and the hoarding practices of the Puritans whose discourse he imitates: he declares that “money’s a whore, a bawd, a drudge, / Fit to run out on errands: let her go” (*Devil Is an Ass*, 2.1.1–2).⁴⁶ Ultimately, Merecraft’s plotting is superseded by the schemes of the equally theatrical Wittipol: appropriately, since Merecraft’s proxy Fitzdottrel is as much of a hoarder as Jonson’s earlier Puritan schemers, whose miserliness extends to his wife as well as his wealth. What Merecraft’s appropriation of Puritan show does produce, however, is the perfect frame for the last act’s performative flourishes;⁴⁷ perhaps, in a later comedy less centrally concerned with Puritan hypocrisy, Jonson is reflecting metafictionally on his own efforts to make Puritanism theatrically profitable in *The Alchemist* and *Bartholomew Fair*.

Profit in these two comedies is often expressed as financial gain, but money in Jonson’s drama is rarely just money. Instead, economic transactions model the wider interactions of society, as well as implicitly (and sometimes problematically) acknowledging the profit-imperative of Jonson’s commercial theater. Similarly, theatrical success against the Puritans can be as much moral as material, as Jonson co-opts the financial and contractual analogies of contemporary Puritan preaching to discredit his opponents in their own terms. Puritan economic separation is exposed as antithetical to society, and often spiritually barren, with Jonson perhaps indirectly criticizing the sterility of a religious sect that characterized the elect as a numbered, segregated, and carefully circumscribed community. Thus Jonson’s drama attacks Puritanism not simply by accusing Puritan characters of hypocritical self-interest, but also by suggesting that separatism, in both the commercial and religious sense, disrupts and threatens the material and theological economy of London. Yet, ultimately, Jonson’s plays offer some hope to his audiences: *The Alchemist* and *Bartholomew Fair* close by breaking through separatist boundaries and forcing their Puritan characters back into mainstream commercial, spiritual, and social interaction. If for Jonson the Puritan preaching enterprise was irredeemably flawed, he hints in closing that his own world of theatrical experience may prove more profitable for the discerning consumer, offering a moral and even spiritual resource that enriches players and playgoers alike.

45. Darrell’s trial was reported in Samuel Harsnett’s *A Discovery of the Fraudulent Practices of John Darrel* (1599). See Sanders, *Ben Jonson’s Theatrical Republics*, 111.

46. Ben Jonson, *The Devil Is an Ass*, ed. Peter Happé (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994). The Revels Plays.

47. *Ibid.*, 20.