SEL 38 (1998)
ISSN 0039-3657

Refashioning Society in Ben Jonson's *Epicoene*

MARJORIE SWANN

Englishmen in the early modern period were obsessed with their bloodlines. "One of the most striking features of the age," writes Lawrence Stone, "was a pride of ancestry which now reached new heights of fantasy and elaboration."[1] Although other criteria of social merit were emerging, genealogy and rank were, in theory, inextricably linked, and lineage was thus vitally important in establishing a man's social identity.[2] The genealogically minded individual regarded himself as "a trustee for the handing on of blood, property and tradition,"[3] and strove to perpetuate his bloodline by procreating within marriage. Concomitantly, female chastity (premarital virginity, postmarital fidelity) was the foundation of an early modern woman's social value.[4] As Coppélia Kahn insists, "The biological importance of female chastity is . . . inseparable from its social importance"—female sexual misconduct would sully the medium by which male blood and property were transferred in a patrilineal society.[5] It was believed that women were naturally lascivious, and this construction of female sexual voracity provided a rationale for male domination: to preserve women's all-important chastity, men had to control female behavior.[6] The significance of female sexuality—and the need for its regulation by men—was thus understood in reproductive terms.

In his city comedy *Epicoene*, Ben Jonson explores how a protocapitalist marketplace could transform social relations

Marjorie Swann is assistant professor of English at the University of Kansas. She is working on a study of the culture of collecting in early modern England.

predicated on lineal reproduction yet also maintain time-honored hierarchies of rank and gender. L. C. Knights depicted Jonson as a beleaguered traditionalist who excoriated the new, commercialized social relations flourishing in early modern England, and some recent commentators similarly argue for Jonson's "reactionary opposition to capitalism," his "revulsion toward the acquisitive urge," and "his distaste for a social system organized around competitive market forces."[7] However, as Don E. Wayne observes, we also find in Jonson's work "signs of a disturbed awareness that his own identity as poet and playwright—and therefore his personal transcendence of the still rigid social hierarchy in which he lived and wrote —depended on the same emerging structure of social relationships that he satirized in his plays."[8] *Epicoene* reveals Jonson's complex response to commercial capitalism, for in the play the dynamics of a "possessive market society" simultaneously subvert and uphold a hereditary social order.[9] In *Epicoene*, I will argue, commodity relations problematize the social significance of filiation and, by undermining women's importance as reproductive resources, provide new opportunities for female autonomy. But even as Jonson exposes—and revels in—the ironies of socioeconomic change, he also wishes to limit the effects of social upheaval, and he depicts the market forces of early modern London as ultimately reinforcing traditional distinctions of status and gender. *Epicoene* is thus a deeply ambivalent "interrogative text," exhibiting a politics that is potentially radical in some aspects, yet staunchly conservative in others.[10]

The hero of *Epicoene* augments his wealth and status through commercial relationships. Morose, a noise-hating gentleman, intends to disinherit his nephew, Dauphine, by marrying and begetting an heir. Dauphine triumphs over Morose by proferring a "silent woman"—Epicoene—for his audiophobic uncle to wed. As soon as she marries Morose, Epicoene behaves like a voluble harpy, and Morose frantically tries to escape wedded hell, finally agreeing to submit to his nephew if Dauphine can somehow nullify the marriage. An annuity and his inheritance secured by a contract with his uncle, Dauphine plucks the wig from Epicoene's head to reveal that Morose has "married" a boy whom Dauphine has trained and crossdressed to perform this role. *Epicoene* thus presents an economic struggle between a character who attempts to exert social power through procreation, and a character whose economic activism mocks the reproductive basis of patrilineage even as it allows him to buttress his position within a hereditary social order.

Morose understands himself to be a member of a "society of blood" in which marriage is not a personal, affective relationship, but an institution regulating the transmission of wealth and status.[11] Morose does not seek emotional or erotic gratification from marriage: he wants to marry a mute woman "of any form or any quality, so she be able to bear children."[12] Morose assumes that elite male power relations are negotiated through reproductive female bodies, and he intends to vanquish Dauphine through his instrumental use of Epicoene's sexual organs: "This night I will get an heir and thrust him out of my blood like a stranger" (II.v.98–9). Likewise, Morose later assumes that the inability to reproduce will guarantee the annulment of his marriage, and he therefore proclaims himself a "bridegroom uncarnate": "I am no man, ladies . . . Utterly unabled in nature, by reason of frigidity, to perform the duties or any the least office of a husband" (V.iv.41–4). In declaring himself impotent, Morose rescinds his power to shape a hereditary social order. When Epicoene subsequently refuses to divorce him, however, Morose finds himself trapped in a world which apparently no longer revolves on a reproductive axis: only by entering into a financial contract with Dauphine can Morose gain his freedom.

Throughout the play, Morose acts on his belief that relations of blood are the foundation of his society's system of values. Morose feels that Dauphine has nullified his status as Morose's "next of blood" (I.ii.17) by leaving his hereditary social position to assume a higher rank: "He would be knighted, forsooth, and thought by that means to reign over me, his title must do it: no, kinsman, I will now make you bring me the tenth lord's and the sixteenth lady's letter, kinsman, and it shall do you no good, kinsman. Your knighthood itself shall come on its knees, and it shall be rejected . . . it shall cheat at the twelvepenny ordinary, it knighthood, for its diet all the term time, and tell tales for it in the vacation, to the hostess; or it knighthood shall do worse, take sanctuary in Coleharbour, and fast" (II.v.99–109). As he reveals his motives for disinheriting Dauphine, Morose replaces the epithet "kinsman" with the reifying label "it knighthood": from Morose's perspective, Dauphine's new title erases his kinship status. His description of Dauphine's social mobility is ambiguous, but Morose implies that Dauphine has deliberately fulfilled a personal goal—"He would be knighted." In the context of *Epicoene*, as P. K. Ayers has noted, "Morose's comments suggest that [Dauphine] . . . has bought his title."[13] Despite his ungentlemanly title-buying, however, Dauphine still wishes to retain his standing—and future financial benefits—as Morose's "next of blood."

Dauphine's very name denotes the contradictory social position he inhabits. "Dauphine Eugenie" translates as "well-born heir," but the "e" added to "dauphin" creates an impossible feminine form of the word: Jonson designates Dauphine as the heir who cannot be.[14] Dauphine is working both sides of the socioeconomic street, trying to maintain his position in a traditional hierarchy of status while also exploiting new opportunities for advancement. Dauphine's purchased title embodies a veneration of traditional marks of status which paradoxically leads to a commercialization of the social hierarchy—Dauphine at once affirms and undermines a hereditary social order premised on blood. Dauphine's ability to surpass his uncle's rank infuriates Morose, and the old courtier aims to punish Dauphine for his betrayal of landed family values. By disinheriting him, Morose will financially erode Dauphine's new social standing and thwart his nephew's attempt to commodify hereditary status hierarchies. Thus Morose's punishment of his nephew is not, as Ian Donaldson has argued, simply a manifestation of "misanthropy,"[15] but is rather an attempt to stymie the development of a new set of social relations.

The conclusion of a comedy usually reasserts social harmony with a wedding and the promise of fecundity. By contrast, after Morose has been effectively castrated and divorced, Dauphine secures his position as Morose's heir by frustrating the processes of marriage and procreation. Unlike the typical gentleman-tricksters of city comedy, Dauphine evinces no interest in matrimony; indeed, as Mary Beth Rose observes, by the end of the play, Dauphine "has travestied and undone marriage."[16] In garnering his inheritance with a boy-actor hired to play the woman's part, Dauphine elides the hereditary transmission of wealth with a form of commercialized, all-male theatrical practice.[17] Like his purchase of a title, Dauphine's theatrical swindling of Morose establishes contradictory social dynamics. On the one hand, Dauphine acknowledges the social power of reproduction by striving to frustrate his kinsman's attempt to beget an heir; yet as Dauphine's success indicates, in a capitalist economy, rank and wealth may be commodified and transferred by contractual relationships between men which do not require female bodies. One might argue that Dauphine simply asserts the claims of kin in a system of primogenitural inheritance; however, Dauphine's triumph over Morose problematizes the social significance of marriage and procreation—and the role of women as reproductive resources vital to a patrilineal society. Feminist scholars have tended to

evaluate *Epicoene* as a straightforwardly conservative work in which Jonson "reinforce[s] patriarchal authority" by "upholding the socially sanctioned gender divisions."[18] However, the process by which Dauphine becomes a knight and heir has no role for women: in rendering marriage and reproduction unnecessary to the commercialized social relations by which Dauphine profits, Jonson reconfigures important elements of the early modern sex-gender system. The gender politics of *Epicoene* are thus more complicated than critics have acknowledged.

As Peter Stallybrass has demonstrated, in early modern England the regulation of female sexuality focused on three homologous physical thresholds: the vagina, the mouth, and the doorway of the house. A woman who talked or left her home signified her sexual wantonness; therefore, the maintenance of chastity also entailed the restriction of female speech and movement.[19] In *Epicoene*, Jonson depicts women who defy these norms of behavior. While Morose's bride, as a "silent woman," initially epitomizes female virtue, her postmarital loquacity indicates her unruliness. Similarly, the Collegiates, a group of "ladies . . . an order between courtiers and country madams," boldly "live from their husbands" and establish themselves as arbiters of fashionable London society, daring to "cry down or up what they like or dislike . . . with most masculine or rather hermaphroditical authority" (I.i.71–7). The Collegiates are also unabashedly promiscuous and use abortifacients to prolong their careers as sexual adventurers: "How should we maintain our youth and beauty else? Many births of a woman make her old, as many crops make the earth barren" (IV.iii.54–6). The bodies of the Collegiates are thus "grotesque," in Mikhail Bakhtin's sense of the term, their orifices open to the world while the women talk incessantly, cavort away from their homes, and commit adultery. Yet in avoiding childbirth, the Collegiates also reject a central function of the grotesque female body.[20] In his epigram on "Fine Lady Would-Be," Jonson excoriates such female control of reproduction:

> The world reputes you barren; but I know
> Your 'pothecary, and his drug says no.
> . . . . . .
> What should the cause be? Oh, you live at court:
> And there's both loss of time and loss of sport
> In a great belly. Write, then, on thy womb:
> Of the not born, yet buried, here's the tomb.[21]

Although Lady Would-Be will produce no socially disruptive bastards, her self-induced sterility—the duplicitous "classicizing" of her grotesque body—is still transgressive because her sexuality is not subject to male control.

Knowing Jonson's aversion to female sexual autonomy—which also emerges in his attacks on tribady[22]—critics assume that we are meant to view the Collegiates as "emblems of sexual deficiency," "unnatural" creatures who "have denied their own womanhood."[23] However, Jonson's treatment of these unruly women is more equivocal than one might expect. It is true that the Collegiates are derided by the male characters of the play, and they stand "mute" when it is revealed that Epicoene, with whom they have shared their "mysteries," is actually a boy in cahoots with Dauphine (V.iv.227–34). Yet, as Barbara C. Millard observes, "Only Daw, La Foole, and Morose are disgraced publicly and suffer loss of prerogative and stature. Although the women are proven deceived in their opinion of Daw and La Foole, Clerimont and Truewit [and the audience] are duped as well by the Epicoene trick."[24] Moreover, we are told that the Collegiates will continue to behave immodestly in the future: Truewit cheerfully promises that when Dauphine's boy-actor matures, he will "make a good visitant" to the women (V.v.232). Jonson could have staged the reform—the chastening—of this gaggle of Lady Would-Bes, but he chooses not to do so. Susan Carlson insists that we analyze how the conclusion of comedy shapes female roles: although Rosalind or Viola may exhibit unconventional power and freedom for several hours, comedy's reassertion of order neutralizes such female independence by ensconcing the heroine safely in the bonds of patriarchal matrimony. As Carlson notes, "While women's dominance in the genre is temporary, their final positions are meant to reverberate far into the future . . . [W]hen comedy ends, the role reversals are *reversed*, the misrule is curtailed, and any social rebellion is tempered by the good feelings presumably attached to the reestablishment of order."[25] It is important to realize, therefore, that the social order Jonson establishes at the conclusion of *Epicoene* neither "curtails" nor "tempers" the promiscuity of the Collegiates.

The success of Dauphine reveals that male social status is a commodity which may be secured without the mediation of reproductive female bodies. The social importance of chastity becomes negligible if the female body does not function as the conduit of a male bloodline: the Collegiates are not harshly censured because their traditionally monstrous behavior has

become socially insignificant. If the development of commodity relations thus renders female sexual misconduct unthreatening, Jonson also perceives that capitalism could empower women in new ways. David Underdown argues that as a market economy grew in early modern England, misgivings about social change were expressed as a determination to maintain gender categories, and women's economic activities were often condemned as a source of instability.[26] When Truewit tries to dissuade Morose from marrying, he evokes a stereotypical vignette of the acquisitive wife who wreaks havoc on her husband's landed status: "She must have that rich gown for such a great day, a new one for the next, a richer for the third . . . while she feels not how the land drops away, nor the acres melt, nor foresees the change when the mercer has your woods for her velvets" (II.ii.101–8). Truewit next transforms the consuming wife into an adulteress who plots to kill her husband (II.ii.121–8). In this episode, Truewit and Morose implicitly view society as a reproductive social order: in a traditional society of blood, commodity relations, like female promiscuity, threaten to undermine the patrilineal transmission of wealth and status, and Truewit thus freights the figure of the unchaste wife with fears of the disruptive effects of capitalism. Karen Newman has suggested that in *Epicoene*, "Men and the traditional landed values of the elite are pitted against a burgeoning consumer culture Jonson and his contemporaries identify as feminine."[27] Yet Jonson's depiction of the relationship among gender, status, and commercial capitalism is far more complex than Newman acknowledges. Although Morose and Truewit readily "identify" consumer culture as monstrous and "feminine," Jonson does not straightforwardly feminize and denounce commercial activities: with the victory of Dauphine, Jonson elides the "traditional landed values of the elite" with male attitudes and practices rooted in Jacobean London's "burgeoning consumer culture." At the same time, however, Jonson perceives that capitalism may destabilize society by providing new opportunities for female autonomy.

Early in the play, Dauphine's friends Clerimont and Truewit debate whether women ought to acquire beauty through consumerism. Clerimont, who pursues Lady Haughty, one of the Collegiates, champions "simplicity" rather than "th'adulteries of art" and decries Lady Haughty's "pieced beauty" (I.i.94–7, 81), her use of purchased goods to alter her appearance. In an adaptation of Ovid's *Ars amatoria*, Truewit declares that he approves of such female artifice. While Ovid stresses the final, positive effect of a

woman's artful appearance, Truewit emphasizes the material practice of the beautician. He demands, "Is it for us to see their perukes put on, their false teeth, their complexion, their eyebrows, their nails?" (I.i.112–4), the hammering anaphora on "their" ironically insisting that "what is theirs is not theirs at all."[28] Truewit continues to demystify the artful, "pieced" woman, recounting how he once surprised a lady at her toilette who "snatched at her peruke to cover her baldness and put it on the wrong way," creating a "reversed face, when [Truewit] still looked when she should talk from the tother side" (I.i.126–31). Although he is ostensibly a proponent of cosmetology, Truewit's catalogue of female prostheses elaborates upon Clerimont's disparaging reference to "pieced beauty." In *Epicoene*, women who attempt to fashion new identities with commodities—wigs, false teeth—only succeed in revealing their laughably derivative nature.

The gendered ideology of consumption presented in this play develops Jonson's characteristic strategy of conflating artistic production, ownership, and self-possession. As Douglas Bruster observes, "the idea of chattel—and the self's relation to property" received new attention in early modern literature,[29] and Jonson keenly participated in this cultural attempt to define the relationship between commodities and selfhood. Throughout his career Jonson struggled to elevate the status of literary production and to distinguish the activities of the professional writer from those of the parasitic consumer, seeking to construct the writer as an artisan who retained "proprietary rights" over the commodities he produced.[30] In this schema, the author of a play, rather than the acting company which performed it, was the text's "owner," a relationship which Jonson enshrined in the 1616 publication of his *Works*.[31] In prefaces and poems, Jonson also enjoins his public to "understand"[32] his artistic products, thus trying to curb the creative agency of consumers. Rather than an autonomous consumer, Jonson envisions what Stanley Fish terms "an author-reader," a reader "whose mind is attired with the same perfections as the mind informing the book."[33] While the "understanding" reader is not entirely passive, he submits himself to Jonson's proprietary authority over his texts. Jonson realizes, however, that as commodities, his texts are susceptible to abuse:

> When we do give, Alphonso, to the light
> A work of ours, we part with our own right;
> For then all mouths will judge, and their own way:
> The learn'd have no more privilege than the lay.
>
> (*Poems*, p. 76, lines 1–4)

The man or woman who "understands" respects the integrity of Jonson's work and the primacy of its author; the self-interested consumer, by contrast, aggrandizes his own identity by effacing the authority of the producer. Besides the unlearned who read his work "their own way," Jonson is also vulnerable to the predations of plagiarists, and he vigorously attacks such thievery: in one epigram, Playwright tries to fabricate a play by stealing five of Jonson's "toys," while in another verse Jonson reveals how Poet-Ape "makes each man's wit his own" (*Poems*, pp. 55, 31). Jonson insists that the plagiarist of his text cannot be a poet, a *maker*, because the literary fragments the plagiarist manipulates are, ultimately, possessed by Jonson himself. While the professional writer creates—and continues to exercise proprietary rights over—his text, the plagiarist can only function as an unproductive parasite.

In the Jonsonian commodity relation, the producer establishes his identity through his fashioning of commodities; this identity is affirmed by those who "understand" his texts, and attacked by mere consumers. Yet, as Richard Burt argues, "production and consumption were not always clearly separable in Jonson's poetics of imitation."[34] Jonson conceived of literary production as a process of imitation through which the poet created cohesive entities from an "initial gathering in of fragments."[35] While Jonson strove to distinguish his legitimate, productive brand of *imitatio* from plagiarism, the two activities were embarrassingly similar. Thomas Dekker, for example, complained that Jonson's use of "the borrowed weapons of all the old Maisters of the noble Science of Poesie" did not constitute authorship, but succeeded "only to shew how nimbly we can carve up the whole messe of the Poets":[36] to Dekker, Jonson was a classics-mongering version of Poet-Ape. Thus, the distinction Jonson attempted to establish between literary production and consumption was precarious—the imitative author could be viewed as a plagiarist, while the plagiarist could be esteemed as a producer of literary texts.

The equivocal nature of Jonson's concept of production and consumption is embodied in his use of the term "piece." His dedicatory letter to Sir Francis Stuart, for example, designates *Epicoene* as "this dumb piece," referring to the literary work in its entirety, made "dumb" when the play was suppressed in 1610. Jonson elsewhere speaks approvingly of a writer's craftmanship in fashioning a play as a "whole piece" (*Poems*, p. 333, line 17), and valorizes his dead son as his "best piece of poetry" (*Poems*, p. 27, line 10). Regarded as the product of a male creator-owner, the "piece"

constitutes a complete artwork. In the Prologue to *Epicoene*, however, Jonson suggests that the "cunning palates" in his audience will consume his play piecemeal:

> And though all relish not, sure there will be some
> That, when they leave their seats, shall make 'em say,
> Who wrote that *piece* could so have wrote a play,
> But that he knew this was the better way.
> (lines 10, 12–15, emphasis mine)

Here, the term "piece" signifies a decontextualized portion of the whole. Viewed as the product of its author, the play is a whole "piece"; consumed by the paying public, it is fragmented and becomes *pieces*. The consumed, disintegrated artwork nonetheless continues to "belong" to the playwright himself—Jonson promises that the members of the audience "shall eat / A week at ord'naries on his [Jonson's] broken meat" (Prologue, lines 26–7). Although the spectators of *Epicoene* may pay their tavern bills by reciting lines from the play, these consumed and recycled scraps of Jonson's art remain *his* property. Yet the fact that Jonson uses the same term, "piece," to describe both the unified artwork and the consumed, fragmented commodity suggests that production and consumption may, finally, be indistinguishable.

Jonson's project to differentiate the proprietary producer from the parasitic consumer gains new urgency when gender roles are at stake. In *Epicoene*, Truewit's compulsive exhibition of women's "pieced beauty" culminates in his stage-management of the blazon of Mistress Otter, the socially ambitious shopkeeper who wishes to join the Collegiates. Perceiving that drink has loosened the tongue of Mistress Otter's husband, Truewit instructs Dauphine and Clerimont to encourage Captain Otter's indiscretion, while Truewit himself fetches Mistress Otter so that she will hear her secrets betrayed by her husband. Captain Otter reports that his wife has "a peruke that's like a pound of hemp made up in shoe-threads," and confides, "All her teeth were made i' the Blackfriars, both her eyebrows i' the Strand, and her hair in Silver Street. Every part o' the town owns a piece of her . . . She takes herself asunder still when she goes to bed, into some twenty boxes, and about next day noon is put together again, like a great German clock; and so comes forth and rings a tedious larum to the whole house"(IV.ii.80–91). Captain Otter's description of his wife's "pieced" body rewrites the Petrarchan blazon in commercial terms. The collection of

gems and precious metals which denotes female beauty in traditional amatory verse now becomes a list of items purchased by Mistress Otter in the marketplace. "Every part o' the town owns a piece of her": as in the Jonsonian commodity relation, ownership is the prerogative of producers, not consumers. Captain Otter's anatomy of his wife reveals that women cannot fabricate new identities for themselves because they do not *own* the goods they buy. We might compare Jonson's construction of the producer-as-owner with an earlier representation of female consumerism by John Lyly. In *Midas*, when Petulus arrives to visit Celia, her maid informs him, "My mistress would rise, and lacks your worship to fetch . . . the hair that she must wear today." When asked, "Why, doth she wear any but her own?," the maid replies, "In faith, sir, no. I am sure it is her own, when she pays for it."[37] It is precisely this logic of female ownership which Jonson denies. In *Epicoene*, Jonson constructs female consumption as an activity which can only signify women's lack of autonomy. While the blazoned body of the Petrarchan mistress bespeaks the unity of the male mind in Renaissance love poetry, the fragmented female body under commercial capitalism now testifies to the primacy of a city of manufacturers who continue to exert proprietary rights over the commodities they have produced: "Every part o' the town owns a piece of her."[38]

Mistress Otter, like the Collegiates, has abandoned the strictures of patriarchal marriage. Although she does not live apart from him, Mistress Otter completely subordinates her husband, for under the terms of their marriage contract, Captain Otter has agreed that his wife will "reign in [her] own house" (III.i.30–1). Captain Otter's humiliating blazon of his wife does not change the power-structure of their relationship: Mistress Otter continues to dominate their marriage. In blazoning his wife's body, then, Captain Otter does not regain his authority as a husband, but rather reveals that his wife is controlled by forces external to the marital household—she is "owned" by the city. Jonson elsewhere explicitly personifies London as a masculine entity. Early modern English writers usually depicted London as a woman; however, in the *Londinium* arch which he devised for the coronation pageant of James I, Jonson represented "the Genius of the City" as a man.[39] In *Epicoene*, Jonson's masculinized city keeps women in their place, and thus renders husbands unnecessary to the maintenance of the gender hierarchy.

The irrelevance of marriage to Jonson's urban gender relations may be better appreciated if we compare the blazon of Mistress Otter to an episode in Dekker's *The Shoemaker's Holiday*,

in which Ralph gives his wife a pair of shoes fashioned by himself and his fellow craftsmen:

> Thou know'st our trade makes rings for women's heels.
> Here, take this pair of shoes cut out by Hodge,
> Stitched by my fellow, Firk, seamed by myself,
> Made up and pinked with letters for thy name.[40]

The shoes emblematize female identity as a commodity, produced by collective male labor, which reinforces the gender hierarchy within marriage. The shoes are "rings," supplementary wedding-bands, and Ralph urges his wife,

> Wear them, my dear Jane, for thy husband's sake,
> And every morning, when thou pull'st them on,
> Remember me, and pray for my return.
> Make much of them, for I have made them so
> That I can know them from a thousand moe.
>
> (I.i.242–6)

The shoes, although bearing Jane's name, function "not as a memento of Ralph, but instead as a male-constructed reminder to her of their relationship."[41] For Dekker, commodity production serves to buttress the institution of marriage. In Jonson's blazon of Mistress Otter, by contrast, the commodity relation does not supplement marriage, but *replaces* it as the site of female subordination. Marriage has become an unnecessary institution in the sex-gender system Jonson creates in *Epicoene*: the market transforms women's subjugation into the function of protocapitalist London.

Jonson's depiction of Mistress Otter also reveals how considerations of social rank inflect his paradigm of the acquisitive, "pieced" woman. Like Dauphine, Mistress Otter attempts to realize social ambitions by exploiting commodity relations. As a beneficiary of London's commercial revolution, a "rich china-woman" (I.iv.25) who sells luxury goods, Mistress Otter seeks to transform her economic clout into a new social identity. Arrayed in expensive, fashionable clothes, Mistress Otter relentlessly tries to join the well-born Collegiates and become "the only authentical courtier that is not naturally bred one" (III.ii.26–7). However, the very environment which provides Mistress Otter with financial power puts her in her place. As she describes her self-destructive dream to Clerimont, Mistress Otter reveals that London continually frustrates her social aspirations:

> Yes, sir, anything I do but dream o' the city. It stained me a damask table-cloth, cost me eighteen pound at one time, and burnt me a black satin gown as I stood by the fire at my Lady Centaure's chamber in the college another time. A third time, at the lord's masque, it dropped all my wire and my ruff with wax candle, that I could not go up to the banquet. A fourth time, as I was taking coach to go to Ware to meet a friend, it dashed me a new suit all over—a crimson satin doublet and black velvet skirts—with a brewer's horse, that I was fain to go in and shift me, and kept my chamber a leash of days for the anguish of it.
>
> (III.ii.60–70)

The "It" at the beginning of Mistress Otter's second sentence lacks an antecedent; "the city" slips into the syntactic void and becomes an agent which systematically prevents Mistress Otter from disrupting the social order.

In the figure of Mistress Otter, Jonson confronts his anxiety that the new socioeconomic conditions exploited by Dauphine will nullify status boundaries. As an unruly, "grotesque" woman who intends to transform her commercial prosperity into social mobility, Mistress Otter incarnates the threat that women under capitalism will destabilize society. As Peter Stallybrass observes, in the early modern period the "closed," chaste female body was associated with the maintenance of a traditional social hierarchy. In a reproductive social order, the (necessarily chaste) woman can bestow status and wealth on the man she marries, "so the differentiation of women simultaneously establishes or reinforces the differentiation of men," perpetuating distinctions of rank.[42] The "class aspirant," Stallybrass notes, wants to preserve social closure "since without it there would be nothing to aspire *to*," yet "that closure must be sufficiently flexible to incorporate *him*." The social-climber will thus conceptualize the female body as an unstable entity, "oscillating between the enclosed body (the purity of the elite to which he aspires) and the open body (or else how could he attain her?)."[43] We find a parallel, though significantly revised dynamic at work in Jonson's portrayal of Mistress Otter. On the one hand, Mistress Otter's body, garbed in expensive clothes appropriate to the elite, signifies the potential eradication of traditional status boundaries by a commercial order. Yet Mistress Otter's body is also continually disciplined—not made chaste, but punished and segregated from the elite venues she seeks to infiltrate. Early modern London forcibly interpellates Mistress Otter as a non-elite,

"pieced" female consumer, forever subordinate to her social superiors and to the city which produces her. In the punishment of Mistress Otter we find the dynamics of self-regulation, not yet internalized, which will later construct the hysterical bourgeois female body.

Through his depiction of the socially ambitious yet self-destructive Mistress Otter, Jonson explores how commercial capitalism need not threaten but instead strengthen status and gender hierarchies in a social order driven by commodity relations. Like Dauphine, Mistress Otter attempts to reconcile her economic status and her social standing. While Dauphine is successful and becomes the hero of the play through his commercial activism, Mistress Otter is thwarted. The protocapitalist marketplace, the medium which apparently allows Mistress Otter to threaten the traditional hierarchies of class and gender, actually serves to control her: the "open" female body, possessed not by a sexually proprietary husband but by the capitalist city, is paradoxically controlled by the very conditions of its consumption-crazed promiscuity. As Jonson's blazoning of the female body reveals, a woman cannot create an autonomous identity through consumption—like the plagiarist, she can only cobble together unstable amalgams of "pieces," fragments which continue to "belong" to their producer, the masculinized city. In *Epicoene*, Jonson thus establishes the dynamics of a revised sex-gender system founded not on the regulation of female sexuality, but rooted in the paradoxical logic of the commodity-as-piece(s): the Jonsonian commodity relation becomes the basis of the gender hierarchy. Historians have argued that the social and economic changes of the early modern period catalyzed the increased subjection of women, including greater control of women's sexuality and the strengthening of patriarchal authority in the family.[44] In *Epicoene*, Jonson envisions a different process of female subjection by which the disciplinary function of the patriarchal father or husband is performed by the protocapitalist city. Jonson transforms the marketplace, traditionally perceived as a site of female transgression, into the locus of female subjugation in a nonreproductive social order.[45]

Thus, in *Epicoene*, Jonson attempts to fashion a model of social change flexible enough to validate commodity relations, yet sufficiently rigid to maintain social stratification and gender hierarchy. While Dauphine's triumph over Morose represents Jonson's potentially radical vision of commercial relationships which subvert a reproductive society of blood, Mistress Otter represents Jonson's desire to limit the transformative potential

of capitalism. Jonson perceives that in a precapitalist social formation, differences of rank and gender are predicated on the control of the reproductive female body; in *Epicoene*, commodity relations unravel the traditional connections between reproduction, social status, and gender, problematizing the heretofore "natural," biological basis of the social order. Yet Jonson wants to preserve a hierarchical, male-dominated social formation even as he subverts the rationale for controlling women as reproductive resources, and he seeks to establish a new basis for prescribing rank and gender, constructing as principles of regulation what are actually features of the changing economic and social context: commodity relations and the urban marketplace. In *Epicoene*, the very economic conditions which call into question a reproductive social order "naturally" perpetuate status and gender divisions.

Like Dauphine, the heir who buys a title and swindles his uncle, Jonson both subverts and upholds a lineal-biological social order in *Epicoene*. Jonson struggles to formulate a new model of commercialized social relations yet simultaneously attempts to limit the scope of change, revealing the constructed nature of class and gender distinctions even as he seeks to reinforce social inequities. The play thus exemplifies the tendency of early modern texts to "foreclose emerging utopian impulses" by making new "sites and forms of collective politics . . . unimaginable."[46] Yet by focusing on the possibilities for social change which Jonson attempts to efface, we can recover the "utopian impulses" which haunt his depiction of a refashioned society. The male hero of *Epicoene* exploits commodity relations to subvert a hereditary social order, but Jonson disallows such autonomy to the female characters of the play. However, Jonson's construction of a patriarchy without fathers highlights the ambiguous relationship between female subjects and capitalism. Although Jonson represents women as incapable of forging autonomous identities through consumerism, the "pieced beauties" of *Epicoene*, like the Jonsonian commodity, reveal how difficult it is to distinguish production from consumption. The equivocal nature of the commodity-as-"piece" raises the possibility that consumption may be productive—imitative writers and consuming women may, in fact, construct new forms of selfhood through their manipulation of commodities. Thus, even as Jonson seeks to disempower female consumers in the person of Mistress Otter, he anticipates recent work in feminist and cultural studies which argues that through consumerism, women gain agency as they use their bodies to fabricate their own identities.[47]

Ironically, then, Jonson presents a vision of how women could, like Dauphine, be emancipated by commercial capitalism in the very process of representing such a vision as unthinkable. A contradictory mixture of the subversive and the conservative, *Epicoene* testifies to Jonson's ambivalent response to the social upheaval of early modern England.[48]

NOTES

[1]Lawrence Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1558–1641*, abridged edn. (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), p. 16.

[2]As Mervyn James observes, during the Tudor period a new concept of honor emerged which "gave parity, or even priority, to virtue over lineage"; however, "[t]here could be no whole-hearted rejection of blood and lineage in a society for which this was still a central concept" (*Society, Politics, and Culture: Studies in Early Modern England* [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1986], pp. 376, 375). See also Felicity Heal and Clive Holmes, "Lineage," in *The Gentry in England and Wales, 1500–1700* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1994), pp. 20–47.

[3]Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1500–1800*, abridged edn. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 426.

[4]Historical accounts of female chastity include S. D. Amussen, "Gender, Family, and the Social Order, 1560–1725," in *Order and Disorder in Early Modern England*, ed. Anthony Fletcher and John Stevenson (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985), pp. 196–217; and D. E. Underdown, "The Taming of the Scold: The Enforcement of Patriarchal Authority in Early Modern England," in Fletcher and Stevenson, pp. 116–36.

[5]Coppélia Kahn, "The Rape in Shakespeare's *Lucrece*," *ShakS* 9 (1976): 45–72, 61.

[6]On the social construction of female lasciviousness, see Anthony Fletcher, *Gender, Sex, and Subordination in England, 1500–1800* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1995), pp. 4–29.

[7]L. C. Knights, *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1937; rprt. 1962); Walter Cohen, *Drama of a Nation: Public Theater in Renaissance England and Spain* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1985), p. 294; Jean-Christophe Agnew, *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1550–1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1986), p. 120; Katharine Eisaman Maus, "Satiric and Ideal Economies in the Jonsonian Imagination," *ELR* 19, 1 (Winter 1989): 42–64, 56.

[8]Don E. Wayne, "*Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson*: An Alternative View," *RenD* n.s. 13 (1982): 103–29, 107.

[9]The term "possessive market society" is C. B. Macpherson's, qtd. in Wayne, p. 106. On socioeconomic change in early modern England, see A. L. Beier and Roger Finlay, eds., *London, 1500–1700: The Making of the Metropolis* (London: Longman, 1986); F. J. Fisher, "The Development of London as a Centre of Conspicuous Consumption in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," in *Essays in Economic History*, 3 vols., ed. E. M. Carus-Wilson (London: Edward Arnold, 1962), 2:197–207; and Joan Thirsk, *Economic Policy and Projects: The Development of a Consumer Society in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978).

[10]For the term "interrogative text," see Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (New York: Routledge, 1980), p. 92. For other accounts of Jonson's contradictory politics, see Richard Burt, who analyzes Jonson as a "neurotic" whose work exhibits "both conservative and radical political implications" (*Licensed by Authority: Ben Jonson and the Discourses of Censorship* [Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1993], pp. xi, 106); and Bruce Thomas Boehrer, who assesses Jonson's concept of virtue as embodying "unmistakably revolutionary tendencies" which collapse into "royal conservatism" ("Renaissance Overeating: The Sad Case of Ben Jonson," *PMLA* 105, 5 [October 1990]: 1071–82, 1081).

[11]Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1978; rprt. 1990), p. 147. On elite marriage, see Stone, *Crisis*, pp. 271–81; and *Family*, pp. 69–108.

[12]Ben Jonson, *Epicoene or The Silent Woman*, ed. and intro. R. V. Holdsworth (New York: Norton, 1979), I.ii.23–4. All references to *Epicoene* are to this edition by act, scene, and line numbers.

[13]P. K. Ayers, "Dreams of the City: The Urban and the Urbane in Jonson's *Epicoene*," *PQ* 66, 1 (Winter 1987): 73–86, 81. On James I's sale of titles, see Stone, *Crisis*, pp. 41–3.

[14]On the significance of Dauphine's name, see Holdsworth's comments on p. 4, n. 2.

[15]Ian Donaldson, "'A Martyrs Resolution': Jonson's *Epicoene*," *RES*, n.s. 18, 69 (February 1967): 1–15, 5.

[16]Mary Beth Rose, *The Expense of Spirit: Love and Sexuality in English Renaissance Drama* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1988), p. 63.

[17]Intriguingly, the young actor who played Epicoene, Nathan Field, was a protégé of Jonson himself: Jonson acted as Field's tutor, and Field performed in at least three other plays by Jonson. Thus the mercenary alliance between Dauphine and his boy-actor parallels the relationship between the dramatist and actor who collaborated in presenting *Epicoene* at the Whitefriars. For evidence that Field played the role of Epicoene, see Lorraine Helms, "Roaring Girls and Silent Women: The Politics of Androgyny on the Jacobean Stage," in *Women in Theatre*, ed. James Redmond (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989), pp. 59–73, 73 n. 26.

[18]Helms, p. 70; Phyllis Rackin, "Androgyny, Mimesis, and the Marriage of the Boy Heroine on the English Renaissance Stage," *PMLA* 102, 1 (January 1987): 29–41, 36. Jean E. Howard similarly analyzes *Epicoene* as "a play saturated with the fear of women who have moved or might move from their proper place of subordination" ("Crossdressing, the Theatre, and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England," *SQ* 39, 4 [Winter 1988]: 418–40, 429).

[19]Peter Stallybrass, "Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed," in *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy J. Vickers (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 123–42.

[20]On the "grotesque" body, see Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1984), pp. 26–7, 316–22.

[21]Ben Jonson, "To Fine Lady Would-Be," lines 3–12, in *Ben Jonson: Poems*, ed. Ian Donaldson (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1975), p. 33. All future references to Jonson's poetry are to this edition and will appear parenthetically in the text.

[22]On Jonson's attitude toward tribady, see Richmond Barbour, "'When I Acted Young Antinous': Boy Actors and the Erotics of Jonsonian Theater," *PMLA* 110, 5 (October 1995): 1006–22, 1015–6.

[23]Ayers, p. 81; Alexander Leggatt, *Citizen Comedy in the Age of Shakespeare* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1973), p. 88.

[24]Barbara C. Millard, "'An Acceptable Violence': Sexual Contest in Jonson's *Epicoene*," *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 1 (1984): 143–58, 155.

[25]Susan Carlson, *Women and Comedy: Rewriting the British Theatrical Tradition* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1991), p. 21.

[26]Underdown, pp. 135–6.

[27]Karen Newman, *Fashioning Femininity and English Renaissance Drama* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 137.

[28]Jonas A. Barish, "Ovid, Juvenal, and *The Silent Woman*," *PMLA* 71, 1 (March 1956): 213–24, 215.

[29]Douglas Bruster, *Drama and the Market in the Age of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992), p. 43.

[30]Richard C. Newton, "Jonson and the (Re-)Invention of the Book," in *Classic and Cavalier: Essays on Jonson and the Sons of Ben*, ed. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1982), pp. 31–55, 44–5.

[31]On Jonson's strategies of authorship, see Joseph Loewenstein, "The Script in the Marketplace," *Representations* 12 (Fall 1985): 101–14; Timothy Murray, *Theatrical Legitimation: Allegories of Genius in Seventeenth-Century England and France* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), pp. 39–96; and Newton.

[32]See, e.g., Jonson's first poem of his *Epigrams* (*Poems*, p. 7).

[33]Stanley Fish, "Authors-Readers: Jonson's Community of the Same," in *Representing the English Renaissance*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1988), pp. 231–63, 236.

[34]Burt, p. 61.

[35]Richard S. Peterson, *Imitation and Praise in the Poems of Ben Jonson* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1981), p. 2.

[36]Qtd. in Peterson, p. xiii.

[37]John Lyly, *Midas*, in *"Gallathea" and "Midas,"* ed. Anne Begor Lancashire, Regents Renaissance Drama Series (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1969), I.ii.115–22.

[38]On Petrarch's fragmentation of the female body, see Nancy J. Vickers, "Diana Described: Scattered Woman and Scattered Rhyme," in *Writing and Sexual Difference*, ed. Elizabeth Abel (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 95–109. The image of the disintegrated, boxed female body also appears in *Cynthia's Revels* (IV.i.140–9) and *Sejanus* (I.304–10).

[39]Jonson in *The Magnificent Entertainment . . . upon the day of his Maiesties Triumphant Passage . . . through London* (London, 1604), sigs. B4-C2, qtd. in Lawrence Manley, "From Matron to Monster: Tudor-Stuart London and the Languages of Urban Description," in *The Historical Renaissance: New Essays on Tudor and Stuart Literature and Culture*, ed. Heather Dubrow and Richard Strier (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 347–74, 371 n. 37.

[40]Thomas Dekker, *The Shoemaker's Holiday*, ed. R. L. Smallwood and Stanley Wells, Revels Plays (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1979, also Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1979), I.i.238–41.

[41]Bruster, p. 78.

[42]Stallybrass, p. 133.

[43]Stallybrass, p. 134.

[44]On the reinforcement of patriarchy, see Amussen; Stone, *Family*, pp. 109–46; and Underdown.

[45]One might usefully compare the gendered dynamics of the market in *Epicoene* with those represented in *Bartholomew Fair*. In *Epicoene*, Mistress Otter

has abandoned the traditional gender hierarchy of the domestic economy but is controlled by "the city"; in *Bartholomew Fair*, by contrast, the commercial activities of women entrepreneurs are described as biological reproduction—Leatherhead calls Joan Trash's cookies her "gingerbread-progeny," while Knockem dubs Ursula "mother o' the pigs" and describes the meat she sells as "thy litter of pigs" (*Bartholomew Fair*, ed. E. A. Horsman, Revels Plays [London: Methuen, 1960], II.ii.3–4, II.v.70, II.iii.2). Women who are active in Jonson's marketplace are not allowed to be producers with the same autonomy that Jonson ascribes to himself. In *Bartholomew Fair*, by figuring female entrepreneurs as mothers, Jonson implicitly reinscribes them within a male-dominated, domestic economy.

[46]Rosemary Kegl, *The Rhetoric of Concealment: Figuring Gender and Class in Renaissance Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1994), p. 3.

[47]For an overview of feminist analyses of consumerism, see Lisa Tiersten, "Redefining Consumer Culture: Recent Literature on Consumption and the Bourgeoisie in Western Europe," *Radical History Review* 57 (Fall 1993): 116–59, esp. pp. 132–40.

[48]I would like to thank Frank Whigham for his helpful comments on an earlier version of this essay.