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"... take me for a man":
The Role of the Boy Companies in the Theatre of Jacobean London

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in English Literature in the University of Canterbury by Michael D. Lee

University of Canterbury 1993.
Und wir: Zuschauer, immer, überall,
dem allen zugewandt und nie hinaus!

And we: spectators, always, everywhere,
turned toward the world of objects, never outward.

R.M. Rilke, “Die Achte Elegie,”
*Duineser Elegien* [1923].
(tr. Stephen Mitchell.)
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ABSTRACT

This thesis involves a study of theatre in early 17th century London, focussing on the work of the boy companies. These were theatre companies made up entirely of child actors, who performed on the stages of the private theatres up until about 1609. The attitude that I take is that the performances staged by these companies constituted a separate theatre-form or performance-practice of its own, and accordingly I approach the plays put on by these companies as being part of a specific repertoire, the study of which nevertheless bears wide implications for our understanding of the culture of early modern London.

Regarding their performances in terms of the possibilities which they offered for the de-familiarisation of cultural practices, of self-consciously staging conventions in high relief, I have followed a seam of scepticism surrounding the representation of identity in this culture. My 'thesis' is that within the cultural practice that this theatre constituted there was an acute awareness of the inconsistencies and evasions which existed within the strategies of self-fashioning in the urban setting, an awareness which was ironically distinguished by a highly ambivalent theatricality.

The first chapter involves a reading of one of the last and certainly most demanding plays written for this theatre, Epicoene or The Silent Woman by Ben Jonson. Growing out of Jacques Lacan's studies of subjectivity and the subjective gaze, I approach this play as a performance-text which directly and self-consciously addresses issues of performance and dramaturgy. In chapter two I site the space of the theatre itself with reference to other available 'playing spaces', in particular the banqueting-house and the city itself, as I draw in other plays of the repertoire. The thesis concludes with a discussion of the body of the child as being constructed in this culture as an ambiguous site of passivity and self-avoidance, out of which I turn to deal with the constituting and performing of male and female gender.
Epicoene, or The Silent Woman

In Authorem

THou, that wouldst finde the habit of true passion,
And see a minde attir'd in perfect straines;
Not wearing moodes, as gallants doe a fashion,
In these pide times, only to shewe their braines,

Looke here on Bretons worke, the master print:
Where, such perfections to the life doe rise.
If they seeme wry, to such as looke asquint,
The fault's not in the object, but their eyes.

For, as one comming with a laterall viewe,
Unto a cunning piece wroughte perspective,
Wants facultie to make a censure true:
So with this Authors Readers will it thrive:

Which being eyed directly, I divine,
His proofe their praise, will meete, as in this line.

Ben: Johnson

(Jonson, 'Ungathered Verse')
SOMETIME IN late 1609, a theatre company known as the Children of the Queen’s Revels performed *Epicoene, or The Silent Woman*, a play by Ben Jonson. This play involves the conceit of a boy actor, disguised as a woman, whose identity remains hidden right up until the final moments of the play, when he is exposed as an impostor. It proved to be one of the very last plays performed by any company of boy actors, and serves as a notable parting-gesture to this particular period in early modern English theatre. As well, *Epicoene* operates as a powerful commentary on the operation and semiotics of theatre in general in the early 17th century, being not only a theatre-text *per se*, but more suggestively a text that is very much in, of and about the theatre and theatricality itself. The conditions under which *Epicoene* would have originally been performed differed from those of plays written for other companies: the theatre was indoors, lit artificially, and the actors for all the parts - not just the women - were adolescent boys. This thesis centres around, and is an attempt at opening up, the puzzle that the boy companies represent within our knowledge of early modern theatre, and what they in turn articulated about the culture within which they performed. This puzzle in turn discovers its best analogy in *Epicoene*, where the paradoxes involved in the forming of a realisable identity on the stage, starting from the most basic level of ‘one’ being played by ‘another,’ were given voice and, in a sense, ‘staged.’ By seeing *Epicoene* and the other plays performed by the boy companies as constituting a specific repertoire, we can perhaps begin to build up a picture of this particular experience of theatre in London in the early 17th century. I think it is
best to approach the significance of the work of this theatre - for I would argue that the work of the boy companies did constitute a separate theatre-form of its own - through an investigation that involves, or at least invokes, both literary and dramaturgical study.

In my usage of the word, "dramaturgy" involves the specific study of the theatrical space - what it is, how it is used in a performance-situation, and how that use is perceived by an audience. The implications of dramaturgical study radiate beyond the theatre, however, as the theatre - seen as a particular urban site, a place - can be seen to reflect the spatial contexts of the strategies and transactions that go to make up the urban experience. The theatre is operating here almost as a kind of rehearsing-space, and its representations are concerned not only with the individual characters themselves, but also the proximities and gaps between them, the way in which they are shown to look at each other - as well as how those same characters shape the way that they themselves are 'seen.' Space in this way becomes tangible, quantifiable, with the representational issues opened up in this kind of study invoking areas outside the theatre, approaching the wider culture that 'produced' the stage by discovering the symbolic relations that existed within it.

How can notions of 'stage' and 'staging' be understood in this context? In a later chapter I will consider the literal context of the boy companies' stages in terms of their topographical location; here I would rather consider what the term 'stage' implies in terms of the containment and appropriation of space for the effecting of 'theatre.' If we view the stage as if it were a character in a play, what role would it take? In the context of any play, and particularly in dramas of this time, the stage effects a sublimation, a space within which the drama can legitimately be 'seen.' The notion of 'place,' of 'form,' can be seen
to realise the dis-placement of any element that resists constitution, and it is in the nature of the stage, by virtue of its sheer physicality, that it presents a field of focus that insists upon form and upon formation. The materiality of the stage invests expectations of form upon the nature of the text that is performed, the nature of the performance, and its reception; it reflects, in turn, upon the institutionalised expectations of the culture that led to its formation. The stage - in terms of Jonsonian theatre - specifically implies a theatre, a site that privileges both the audience who gather in it, and the performance which they view, and the stage mediates this performance, legitimating it and, more importantly, legitimating the gaze that the concept of 'performance' serves.

An effect of this mediation - a 'given' of performance, and of the texts performed - is the inevitable displacement of material that occurs, the metonymic structure that drama enters into in order to better effect the representation that is taking place. The audience 'sees,' but this is conditional: what is literally seen on stage needs to be supplemented - even supplanted - by what these sights can be said to imply. Within this understanding of the stage, its limitations are made virtues, in that the flat, empty space of the physical stage is able to form any place that the characters believe it to be, so that setting is far more reliant upon - and so exists within - codes and clues as the scene. The setting is described mainly in the way in which the characters relate to each other within it, how they present and represent themselves, what they say and how they say it. This encoding forms the essence and basis of representation in the theatre, and in particular this theatre, giving space manifest meaning and gravity in the midst of apparent emptiness. As a general principle of semiotic theatricality this model is nevertheless highly dependent
upon, and born out of, its audience’s ability and indeed expectation to approach theatre in this way, a dependence which reflects the collectivity of this theatre as a specifically early modern cultural experience.

The displacement that took place on the stage did not constitute a complete break, a composite perfection reliant upon a separation such as the ‘fourth wall’ of late 19th century theatre, but rather referred to a new ‘hidden-ness’ that was emerging in social relations across a wide range of contexts. Comparing the strategies of representation in the theatre to the shifts in commodity relations in the ‘market-place’, Jean-Christophe Agnew makes the point that

[n]o longer was the sense of theatricality confined exclusively to the deliberate representation of common ideals in the negotiated relations between the individual and God; more and more, it suggested the calculated misrepresentation of private meanings in the negotiated relations among men and women... now the mask hid something, kept a secret, deceived.¹

Agnew conceives of this theatre as embodying a commentary and simultaneous rehearsal of what he calls the “crisis of representation,” a crisis that effectively played upon the calculated gaps and omissions in communication that could occur in social exchange. In legal relations this development was marked through the shift in emphasis from universally legitimate and conventional acts of oath and conveyance, to the negotiation of a meeting-point in space and time between two parties, in the form of a contract. This experience located the self in a far closer relation to the construction, transmission and withholding of meaning, with a far greater sense of tension and anxiety surrounding the role of the individual. This would appear to be so even if that implied individuality was not

necessarily secure in the modern sense but rather occupied a transitional position on the way to a more firm identification with normative structures. In order to complete a picture, the viewer must now arm his or her vision; this newly defensive attitude itself draws new attention to subjectivity and the subjective desire, even need, to 'complete,' being unable to base a simple suspension of disbelief upon the evidence of eyes alone.

As a means of understanding the role and formation of the subject, the self, in this equation, the work of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan provides modes of thought which can be applicable. Lacan locates the emergence of the subject - or the "function of the I" - in what he calls the mirror stage, a point in early development which sets in place a vision of selfhood in the individual through the mediation of an external agent. The infant, in Lacan's example, jubilantly beholds his or her image in the mirror, an image which insists upon a totalising ideal, a depiction of definitive, incorporate selfhood, always already there. However, it is nevertheless an image only: as Lacan puts it "the point is that this [ideal] form situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction, which will always remain irreducible for the individual alone." Following on in this way of thinking, the classic gesture of the self is what is termed méconnaissance, a misrecognition or misconstruction born out of the effort to construct wholeness out of fragments, and so realign everything seen into a normative relationship to the self. The 'self,' constituted in an imaginary relation to itself, here institutes a belief in a projected image, a form

\[\text{\footnotesize Footnotes:}\]


through which the subject can anticipate "the maturation of his [sic] power." The self is now subject, a subject whose self-understanding is reliant upon an externalised agency which it has, in turn, already been constituted within. Using language as an example or image of this agency, 'I' operates like a metaphor, a visible, expressible sign that insists upon a verifiable wholeness and palpability by expressing itself as 'other.' Or rather, the effort to identify has been achieved through the mediation of 'otherness,' with the form of the self composed within "the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity" - something which itself can be picked up and turned around, misconstruable.

The necessity of vision, of visibility, provides the cue for another aspect of Lacanian subjectivity. The mirror, like a picture frame - like the stage - forms a composite image out of light, an image subject to the gaze of the viewer. The gaze anticipates and mediates what is seen through the eyes; it is the desire to look, locate and place. In the gaze, the formative effects embodied in the mirror stage are expressed outwards in the subject's desire for form, and within this subjective relation the gaze itself remains hidden, an unseen mechanism. The gaze, therefore, is not so much tangible object as process, a process which emerges out of the subject's act of seeing. As Lacan rhetorically asks, "does this mean that originally it is in the relation of subject to subject, in the function of the existence of others as looking at me, that we apprehend what the gaze really is?" To return to the specular arena of Jacobean theatre, with its plots and spies and spectators, here the answer is certainly yes. The gaze relies upon the

4 ibid., p.2
5 ibid., p.4.
verifiability of the metaphoric structure: the patent signifier. Yet to understand this operation of signification, one must also realise the role of metaphor's opposite number, namely metonymy. Where metaphor places, metonymy displaces, a figure of style that consciously scatters meaning, and which in its very process of obscuring and channelling refers us back to the signifying structure which metaphor embodies. The stage, and the action upon it, operate through both these sides of signification. Claiming completeness and inclusiveness, the process of drama - seen in this light - is made up of fragments, united only by the desire for form; a desire which informs the very completeness of the theatre and the orientation of the stage within it. The stage, and the idea of the stage, begins and mediates this process. Looking at this in a broader context, theatre operates as simultaneous product and image of the alienation experienced by the individual subjects who legitimated it, with its 'completeness' linked through the network of subjectivity and desire to the operation of the gaze. In the reading of Jonson's *Epicoene* that follows in this chapter, the play-text is approached not only in terms of what is contained and said, but also in terms of how the play functioned; how, as a performance-text, it and its elements - the characters, theatrical effects and so on - effectively operated.

- ii -

In the following discussion of *Epicoene*, I will initially concentrate on the opening scene, as this provides a 'window' into the dynamics of the play as a whole. So: the stage lights are lit, the musicians put down their viols, two players - both boys, one playing Clerimont, the other his boy-servant - enter the stage, and thus the
play begins. Much as the audience's very act of attendance at a private theatre was an assertion of social status, so the boy's presence through the scene as Clerimont's possession, his "ingle" (or boy prostitute) as he is described soon after, signifies Clerimont's own status and in turn the privacy of the setting. In other words, the boy's frankness in the opening lines of the play invites the stage to be read as signifying Clerimont's private lodgings, which thus affirms the privileging of the spectator's gaze, that theatre is for them envisaged as an act of over-hearing, rather than simply 'hearing,' albeit fictional. This sense of privileging is then underlined by the singing, and later repetition, of Clerimont's song by the boy. The first may be a private 'rehearsal' and the second a prompted 'performance,' but the fact is both are performances, and each serves to suggest the limits of Clerimont's own role in the scene.

With Tru ewit's entrance onto the stage, the further factor of material space begins to be articulated - that the stage represents only a fragment of the spatial possibilities open to the characters. If this stage represents something, therefore, or sets representation in motion, then the action of representing is operating through the mediation of metonymy as much as through metaphor: the stage may place things on show for the audience, but it only achieves this through displacement. This ambivalence of the stage as a setting - supposedly fixed and yet referring to other spaces - is imitated by the characters standing upon it, as the role of Clerimont's boy exemplifies. Within the immediate context of Tru ewit's and Clerimont's interest in the collegiate ladies, the boy again secures a vital signifying role, this time

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as an envoy from "the mansion you wot of" (I.i.7), Lady Haughty's private chambers wherein "no man can be admitted till she be ready... but the boy here." (I.i.82) In this context, he provides a point of reference to the restricted, silent spaces of female self-fashioning. The boy now becomes a disembodied agent of the gaze, or rather an expression of the desire to gaze. In effect, this makes him a kind of go-between, his very palpability as a boy-on-stage emphasising the restricted privacy of that setting for a context - the theatre - that insists upon visible, verifiable signs. According to his and Clerimont's account, in Haughty's chambers he is an almost-silent plaything, a doll to be dressed, "him she wipes her oiled lips upon like a sponge." (I.i.83) That he is Clerimont's possession in turn legitimates Clerimont's song; the form is given 'weight' in that the song-lyrics can be rationalised as 'accounts.' This legitimation is itself highly ironic however, as the boy's privileged role as envoy to the 'world of women,' inevitably means that he is also envoy from the 'gilder's workshop,' to use Truewit's image. His access to both camps is due only to a high degree of ambivalence which he in fact demonstrates through the scene, varying between latent passivity and patent frankness. With his knowledge of the painting and hanging of a woman's face ("the doing of it" (I.i.104)), the implied possibility is that he too could cast himself in such a form - as he has indeed already been given opportunity to - and his 'form,' sliding from correspondence to correspondence, could find fictive 'completion' projected in the statuesque form of a 'woman.'

Casting, role-playing, performing: this play, and in particular this scene, is alive with theatricality and its effects, even though the

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'theatre' as such is never referred to. Once the play begins to be approached in this way, it can be seen that some quite fundamental assumptions surrounding the theatrical space are being questioned and in some cases severely put to the test. What is theatrical? What does it mean? What is anti-theatrical? Does one necessarily exclude the other? Who watches who? Clerimont's boy displays a great awareness of the implications of 'performing,' insisting for instance that the song he has learnt not be sung to anyone else because of the way in which it displays Clerimont's 'point-of-view,' which in turn opens up the possibility of his being ostracised. Effectively, the boy is warning Clerimont not to put himself in a position where he has an audience, and so is subject to their judgement, ('it will get you the dangerous name of a poet in town, sir...')(I.i.6). The most disastrous thing would happen: he would be put on stage. In this way, one reading of the subtext of this scene is to view it as a rehearsal-of sorts of the relationship between player and audience, with Clerimont, as author, uneasily slipping between roles.

The allusion to a complex relationship between author/performer and reader/spectator calls to mind also a central concern of 'Ben Jonson, Poet' himself: "[r]are poems ask rare friends,"9 as he wrote in his epigram to the Countess of Bedford. For Jonson, writer of this play, authorship was itself a highly self-conscious project which, due to the conflict of rival interpretative methodologies and conceptions of authorship and authority during this period, required the quantification, the construction, of the respective roles of both parties within the process of writing. For this author to achieve creative and interpretative control over the transmission of his texts,

he needed to efface and exercise the ‘vision’ of his readers, so that, as George Rowe has argued, “Jonson... could not view literature apart from its readers.”¹⁰ This squaring-off becomes encapsulated in the theatrical context, as there is clear potential for deception and tyranny if either party attains predominance - especially if that party is the spectators.¹¹ The act of performance, far from constituting a point of articulation, or un-covering, instead shows extraordinary possibilities for deception, distortion, obscuring, mis-reading and ‘over-writing.’ Within these terms, the ‘performance’ refers not only to the reading or singing of specific verses, but to anything that opens itself to being performed, which in turn involves and questions the role of the speaking or singing subject. The boy is concerned not only for the sake of Clerimont’s social status, but also for himself, insofar as the song will bring him “a perfect deal of ill-will at the mansion you wot of, whose lady is the arguement of it, where now I am the welcom’st thing...”¹²(i.i.7-9) Such open-ness would betray the privacy and the supposed non-penetrability of Clerimont’s contained ‘personal self’ to public criticism, as his writing, now in the guise of verse, is “reconcretized as sound... [in a space] already full of sound and of other socially significant semiotic material... [so that] a serious dislocation of authority is not only possible but likely...”¹² Given the subject of the song, this subtextual anxiety is ironic, though certainly not mis-placed.

The lyrics themselves are worth quoting in full:

Still to be neat, still to be dress’d,
As you were going to a feast;

¹¹ ibid., pp.457-8.
Still to be powder'd, still perfumed:  
Lady, it is to be presum'd,  
Though art's hid causes are not found,  
All is not sweet, all is not sound.

Give me a look, give me a face,  
That makes simplicity a grace;  
Robes loosely flowing, hair as free:  
Such sweet neglect more taketh me,  
Than all th' adulteries of art.  
They strike my eyes, but not my heart.  

(I.ii.85-96)

What Clerimont may well be implying through the use of this song is that the fashion for women to bear a "piec'd beauty" with statuesquely painted and polished surfaces suggests that an unconscious discontent is being masked, and that indeed a whole culture of behaviour and appearance is growing up around this need for self-concealment, though he cannot understand why. Truewit, responding to the second playing of this piece, appears to misunderstand him, or at least answer him at cross purposes. That "I love a good dressing before any beauty o' the world" (I.i.97-8) seems to suggest that Truewit is replying only to that part of Clerimont's argument that is concerned with 'beauty' - the "robes loosely flowing, hair as free" rather than "art's hid causes." But there is more to this 'misunderstanding' than meets the eye, as is shown when Truewit goes on to use in his description the image of a form of nature married to art, the garden. As he says, "[a] woman is then like a delicate garden," (I.i.98-99) which can be cultivated to look its best by advancing its strengths, in the same way that roses are bred. In this way, the Lady's clothing operates as a kind of text or picture, appropriating the materiality of the gaze and constructing specific channels in order to manipulate and entrap the gaze of others.

This song concerns itself with the dialectic of the observer and the observed, and how that in turn affects the way in which the observer
'sees,' and the observed 'appears.' Clerimont shows a privileged observer's obsession with the recovery of a supposedly authentic, 'natural' look that by its very innocence will affect the heart rather than strike the eye. But how does one distinguish 'outward' from 'inward'? The tension that Clerimont articulates in his song - that "th' adulteries of art" the Lady dresses herself with confound 'nature' - is to a degree based on an unconscious misapprehension or misconception, which Truewit's response highlights. Desiring clarity and straightforwardness, he really wishes for a greater silence. What Clerimont wants, in the clearing-away of the oiled faces and the masks and perfumes and powders and so on, is to reveal the 'body.' Yet what constitutes this body? Upon what lines is it to be constructed? Surely we can say that such a figure would itself be subject to an unconscious set of expectations, which can only be identified with the collective, legitimating gaze of the spectators, a gaze that in this way operates within the act of seeing, in itself. As one character puts it later on, referring to another's writing gear, "he has his box of instruments... to draw maps of every place and person" (V.i.14,17) - similarly as this conventional gaze allows the signs transmitted in the theatre to be understood, so it too, as a kind of mediator, inscribes. Clerimont fails to acknowledge the formative dynamism of the gaze - which, as Truewit appears to imply, his own desires are heir to - instead choosing to assert his own gaze as a supposedly inert expression of his utopian ideals. Even in Clerimont's idealistic vision of an "art"-free social world, however, there is still this nagging, unarticulated issue of authority and legitimation between spectator and performer - who confers status upon whom? - which remains unresolved by the play.

In Clerimont's song, the closest that anyone gets to an authentic fleshly body - despite his supposed desire for freedom from "th'
adulteries of art” - is either a seemingly disembodied “face,/ That makes simplicity a grace,” or else the fashioned surfaces of the “robes loosely flowing, hair as free.” The role of clothes in framing and presenting the body is so great here that no figuration of the body or of ‘nature’ in general, can be imagined without them. Clerimont’s ‘ideal body’ - his seat of desire - has, it would seem, been already fashioned for him. This apparent desire for an over-writing of meaning, or for a partial view that invites the involvement of the subjective imagination, implicates the kind of societal forces that ‘shape’ the way in which the body is ‘seen.’ Clerimont’s desire for “simplicity” and “nature” can be revealed - and I would argue is revealed - to be in fact a desire for greater control over the form, in this case, that women take.

By denying the role he plays in this formative dialectic, Clerimont is able to effect a means of virtual self-concealment. It is as if through using the reprehensible image of the “Lady,” his own targeted ‘material girl,’ the fragmentary edifice of “her piec’d beauty” has become a displaced symbol of his own abjection, the point of his self-denial. This arguably exemplifies the very existential alienation that Truewit expresses immediately following his entrance and which Clerimont then denies. As Truewit argues, “[w]ith what justice can we complain that great men will not look upon us nor be at leisure to give our affairs such dispatch as we expect, when we will never do it to ourselves, nor hear nor regard ourselves.”(I.i.54-7) In a sense, the boy’s insistence at the very opening of this scene, that “[y]ou shall [hear it], sir, but i’ faith let nobody else”(I.i.4) is entirely appropriate, for it is Clerimont, as much as it is Haughty, who is the subject of the song. In real terms, the subtext of the first performance is that it is a direct address to him from the boy whilst “he comes out making himself ready”(I.i.0[s.d.]), the ‘boy’ functioning for that moment as
Clerimont’s ‘mirror.’ Clerimont is listening to himself, but not in Truewit’s terms, as the ‘self’ that he is listening to is made to seem quite foreign. In this song, then, we discover Clerimont, a stranger, who like the audience-member remains concealed behind the screen of his own assumed passivity. Similarly, the heightened sense of ambivalence which pervades this scene, and this play as a whole, means that for this context “Lady” functions as a general signifier for the ‘fragmentary self,’ interchangeably sliding from form to form, depending on who is ‘looking,’ as well as ‘who’ is being constituted.

- iii -

Having now entered this space of illusoriness, expression and attendant repression in the play, it is worth turning to other elements within it. If ‘true theatricality’ implies the kind of direct monological form of address that one associates with pre-Shakespearean morality drama, or with the extemporised clowning of “Master Tarlton” whose passing the stage-hand in the induction to Bartholomew Fair still laments, then arguably the most ‘theatrical’ character in Epicoene is Truewit. One could argue that Truewit is not so much a character in the narrative sense as a ‘figure’ or theatrical trope of a kind normally associated with morality drama, as he completely goes against the style of self-fashioning that the gallants practise: rather than constituting his own ‘identity’ in terms of reserve and concealment, his presence instead insists upon his own palpability as a character, and upon palpability and patency as theatrical principles per se.

More than any of the other characters in Epicoene, Truewit actively gazes outwards, using his awareness of others as a means of justifying himself (“...these be the things wherein your fashionable
gentlemen exercise themselves, and I for company"(I.i.38-9)) and bringing other characters together in such a way as to serve this desire-to-gaze. On a quite basic level, he reminds the audience-members what they are doing and what they are there for - to look at him. Arguably he expresses nothing throughout the play, and instead functions as a special kind of expression, opening up situations for the other characters like some kind of director. For all his dynamism, Truewit could be said to actually move 'nowhere'; it is as if he uses his words to gesture left and right as the city twists and moves around him, like some great field of networks and treaties. All that there is to see on stage, then, is this isolated and displaced figure, seeming to be almost a spectator who, having found his way on stage, can now see no way off it, and so in the end just stares back out at the audience-members, as if confronting them with their own passivity - or rather, their perspective. Like the audience, for Truewit the stage operates as if it were a viewing gallery, a place to exercise the eyes.

His moral complaint about "our common disease," that 'fashionable' existence is about "not seeking an end to wretchedness but only changing the matter still"(I.i.51-2) can be read as a commentary on the strategies of displacement and withdrawal, of alienating selfhood, that such characters as Dauphine and Clerimont enter into. Dauphine, for instance, concerned to maintain a tight rein over his plot to overthrow Morose, silently stands by as Clerimont runs through the situation with Truewit in I.ii, only to reprimand Clerimont after Truewit's exit with "[c]ome, you are a strange open man to tell everything thus."(I.iii.1) Openness is to be avoided if Dauphine is to retain his power. As an example of this alienating need for containment, however, it is Morose, far more than the gallants, who is overtly portrayed as having a desire to withdraw and
conceal himself in his own inner circle. Through this portrayal, his entrapping-by-society, effectively stage-managed by Truewit, becomes also an opportunity for Truewit to display the full effects of his theatricality, a term which this play’s dramaturgy interprets as being no less than a rehearsal of the culture’s desire-to-gaze, of the notion of surveillance as an expression of power. As has already been suggested, the action of seeing within this specular culture brought with it the gaze’s formative dynamism, a desire to identify that which was in the line of sight within normative lines; a process which invariably re-rehearsed the grounds of the subject’s own constitution. The gaze, as exercised within the channels of seeing, thus reinforced and legitimated the subject’s own sense of self as a principle of power.

In the theatre, theatricality, or the ways and acts of ‘showing,’ operates within the framework of the gaze: it constitutes the basic language of the stage. As such, it has the power to pervert and distort, shaping and extending the desire of the viewer within its encoded framework, forming a montage which is pure méconnaissance. Out of this, theatre here emerges as analogous to what Lacan terms “the triumph of the gaze over the eye”\(^\text{13}\), tricking and ensnaring the eye into believing the constituting form which theatricality and the gaze have taught it to anticipate. Thus, whilst Dauphine virtually escapes the play with his motives unexamined, his uncle Morose, for all their similarities, does not. In III.v, the theatrical Truewit manipulates the situation utterly, using his interpretative skill to undermine Morose’s vulnerable defences at every turn. “Before I was the bird of night to you, the owl, but now I am the messenger of peace, a dove...”(III.v.9-10) Previously, during his invasion of Morose’s house in II.ii, he

could shock Morose with a virtuoso attack upon the very notion of marriage, but now he can shock Morose more fully by not only approving the match, but by even being an apparent acquaintance of the now-hated bride. He parodies Morose’s disposition towards order and containment by congratulating him on carrying on with the marriage (“it shews you are a man constant to your own ends” (III.v.17)) and not listening to his own former guise as “the bird of night” - an aspect of Morose’s impregnability that Truewit had clearly been counting on in II.ii.

In IV.i, when Truewit is having yet another discussion on the subject of appearance and dressing in regard to female behaviour - this time with both Clerimont and Dauphine, he says this: “a man should not doubt to overcome any woman. Think he can vanquish ‘em and he shall; for though they deny, their desire is to be tempted... Though they strive, they would be overcome.” (IV.i.67-9,77) Read out of context, this may well seem to be a rationalised invitation to rape, and in literal terms it certainly is. The ‘rape,’ however is literal purely in terms of the specular society and ideology that this form of theatre rehearses. “They would solicit us, but that they are afraid.” (IV.i.71-2) Why are ‘they’ afraid? Is it that in soliciting they would cease being ‘observed’ and cross over, becoming active ‘observers’ in trying to affect their own choice of fate, and so risking complete isolation? Or is it simply the fear to slip between roles, as doing so would be tantamount to admitting that one was living out a limited role? To enlarge upon this fear, it indicates a tacit acknowledgement of what Truewit earlier termed “our common disease” - that the way people live their lives is characterised by an aversion to change, despite the cost. They appear to be literally entrapped by the expectations of the gaze.
If the acknowledgement of the gaze of others - and of 'the gaze' as a general principle - implies an acknowledgement of alienation, where does that leave those who would gaze upon the stage, where this inversion is effected? Where can they look? Perhaps a better question would be: How can they look? What is happening here closely relates to the interpretative strategies that the characters themselves enter into. Interpretation is, in this play, an on-going process whereby the characters enable themselves to rationalise their own representative strategies within what could be characterised as a 'moral' framework. This is so as it operates through the assumption of the individual self, the named and naming subject, as the source and stable centre of meaning, yet this very apprehension is under the constant threat of undermining itself. The opening scene, again, provides compelling examples of this as the characters make their entrances onto the stage, appropriating its space as 'theirs' by presenting themselves to us who would gaze upon them.

In Jonson's poem "In Authorem"\textsuperscript{14} the action of reading itself is placed under an extraordinary amount of scrutiny. The problem of the poem is centred on the position of the reader, and it is a problem solved by the appropriation of the role of "author-reader," a role which involves the complete identification of the reader 'in' the poem: that the "observer... is indistinguishable from and the cause of what he sees".\textsuperscript{15} The implication of this hypothetical action, collapsing 'author' and 'reader' together within the text, is that the reader's own perspective becomes - and admits to being - totally implicated in the machinations of the text which he or she reads.

\textsuperscript{14} quoted in full on the title-page of this chapter.
Within this model, eyes and "I's": meet without mediation, within a ring of praise and instantaneous self-recognition "as in this line." This bridging of identity, generating sameness, is itself problematic; it can only take place in the contained environment of the court-masque, where the only observer seated at a true point of perspective to the stage-design is the monarch, who is in any case watching himself, as the staging of a masque was a celebration of the king's virtue emblematised. Similarly the courtiers, in seeing the point they occupy in relation to both stage and monarch, are simultaneously able to identify literally with themselves at such an event. Judgement, interpretation - 'reading' as such - no longer exist, as the reader is attired just as the author is. In constructing this hermetic circle, Jonson is making it clear that any action of writing or reading or seeing outside of it automatically implies the mediating fabric of fashioning, of seeing asquint - and of creating difference and otherness, gaps and barriers, and above all differences of authority. It is an acknowledgement that the agency of representation is inescapable, and its effects constantly in motion. The generation of identity therefore takes place in opposition to, or out of alienation from, the others that surround one and that one acknowledges separation from. The gaps that grow up between rival subjectivities mean in turn that autonomy as such is not the chief issue of self-fashioning: to quote Stephen Greenblatt's study of self-fashioning in early modern culture, "the power to impose a shape upon oneself is an aspect of the more general power to control identity - that of others at least as often as one's own."

The characters of *Epicoene* fashion themselves and each other through what they do, so that they might be judged through their actions, within which I would include the action of seeing itself. The stage, the point where dramatic action finds form as 'drama' is again being invoked: seen in this way, it is the stage which to a very large degree 'confers' or conditions identity like a frame or perspective. The stage now becomes a kind of agency; or rather, its relationship to the audience becomes open to being viewed as a model of such an agency, in that it both enacts literally and represents more generally the ideal of a verifiable - 'staged' - form, a closed exteriority. This notion of "form," of a projection that gives the illusion of a 'depth' or 'core' upon its surface via the scattering strategies of metonymy, have much in common with the notion of a mirror or frame in Jonson's own poetic writing, as a "cunning piece wrought perspective"\(^{18}\) - a device which paradoxically creates the illusion of depth within a two-dimensional space in order to be a 'true copy' of nature.\(^{19}\) This sense of a paradox is also present in Lacan's account of the formation of the self, that its constitution rests upon the belief in a projected image; as he puts it, "the agency of the ego [is situated]... in a fictional direction."\(^{20}\) The fictionality manifests itself in a dialectic that crosses over the theatrical stage, a "direction" or line that joins ideal and real, anticipation and retrospection so that each is dependent upon the other.

The notion of 'perspective' could very usefully shape the discussion of a performative aesthetic here. The individual characters, who owe their formation to the strategies of containment

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\(^{18}\) Jonson, "In Authorem," l. 10.
\(^{19}\) Fish, "Authors-Readers..." p.135.
\(^{20}\) Lacan, "The mirror stage..." p.2.
and fashioning that metonymy's desire for rejoining or 'completion' entails, can be seen, along with the stage itself, as themselves 'perspectives' or 'mirrors.' This model operates both in terms of perspective as an illusion of wholeness that is constructed out of their 'fragments,' but also in terms of perspective - their perspective on each other - as a way of seeing, envisaging, approaching. Looking at characters in this way - as true progeny of the stage - would inform not only the way one sees the stage or the stage-players, but more importantly how one constitutes the silent action of seeing. Having opened this chapter by using the stage as launchpad of the performed text, now perhaps the characters who embody this 'text,' this meeting-point, can be used to inform the question of how individual spaces are being envisioned and appropriated.

The material fragments insist on the notion of a defining point, on 'seeing' as the active means by which this is constituted: looking at Clerimont, especially during Truewit's opening-scene introduction, it is as if one is being invited to view this figure as the demonstrable Clerimont, but how? What are we looking at? He is: cipher, token, the man of status, the man who possesses... yet also "the man that can melt away his time, and never feels it."(I.i.22) The most notable quality that Truewit can attribute to Clerimont is his very indefiniteness, his total reliance on affixed tokens of status as a means of distraction from acknowledging his lack of any 'essence'. He is what he possesses, and his greatest possession is his name, and the mystifying concealment that it offers and which he surrounds himself with.

Morose, yet to appear on the stage until the second act, contrasts with this model of self-fashioning, preferring instead to firmly demarcate the limits beyond which he refuses to shift. In him, the
idea of an entrapping gaze is seen at its greatest extreme. Clerimont discusses with Truewit how Morose loathes and avoids the sounds of the city, and many of his cited examples are associated, either directly or indirectly, with the theatre as a specific aural site.

CLERIMONT: He would have hang'd a pewterer's 'prentice once upon a Shrove-Tuesday's riot [when apprentices wrecked brothels and playhouses] for being o' that trade, when the rest were quit.

TRUEWIT: A trumpet should fright him terribly, or the hautboys?

CLERIMONT: Out of his senses. The waits of the city have a pension not to come near that ward. (I.i.149-54)

When Morose finally does enter the stage, he does so at the very beginning of the following act, which in the usual performance context of a private theatre means that his scene would have been preceded by the playing of music. Cleared of extraneous sound, the stage is appropriated by Morose, and it becomes the personal 'presence-chamber' for the court of his voice: an expression of his desire for binding control, a mastery that operates like a perfectly-crafted vice. In the literal sense of the word, he actually shuts out silence as well, with all the arresting intrigue - the rhythmic gaps, the pauses - that it signifies, inserting instead a smothering discourse that mutes not only the sounds that offend him, but more significantly the differences between sound and silence. He qualifies sound and silence by insistently privileging his use of aural space above anyone else's - "all discourses but mine own afflict me, they seem harsh, impertinent, and irksome." (II.i.3-5)

As the boy puts it, speaking from the other side, "his virtue would rust without action"(I.i.163): Morose's obsessional stance can only be demonstrated by breaking into this space through ceaselessly assailing him with noise, any noise. In this way, noise, like his
"virtue," becomes something material, like a blunt instrument, penetrating and dismembering 'silence.' Wearing "a huge turbant of nightcaps on his head, buckled over his ears,"(I.i.136) it is as if he is ensuring that the silence stays 'within' as warding off any threat of acoustic invasion. The effect of this shielding, however, is to turn him into a shell, a seamless bodily surface that insists upon a closed order of borders and laws. Patently unambiguous, he conceals nothing - though it would appear that he has nothing to conceal. By insistently refusing to budge from within the boundaries of his identity, he envelopes himself entirely within an existence which constructs "disputations or... court tumults"(V.iii.44) - activities which most of the other characters keenly engage in - as strange, and estranging: he can only see it all as "turbmoil, which is now grown into another nature to me."(V.iii.51-2) For Morose, the theatre-stage functions as a kind of fly-trap, pinning this outer fragment of his singular identity to its surface, which in turn raises questions about what that surface, the theatre, is itself privileging.

Morose gives silence substance in the way that he physically barricades himself away from all sources of sound, in a sense 'fetishising' silence as some kind of pure, inner essence: the desired fixed point of definition. Morose is very much like the 'gathered self' of Jonson's poetry, putting all his energies into repelling society rather than embracing it:

Well, with mine own frail pitcher, what to do
I have decreed; keep it from waves and press,
Lest it be jostled, cracked, made nought, or less;
Live to that point I will, for which I am man,
And dwell as in my centre, as I can. 21

21 Jonson, 'The Underwood' in Poems. "An Epistle Answering to One that Asked to be Sealed of the Tribe of Ben" II. 56-60.
He contains himself within an exclusive emotional reserve, contrasting with such figures as Clerimont, who is said to even "melt away his time" (I.i.22). Thomas Greene, writing on this aspect within Jonson’s writing, comments that "Jonson seems to see his centered figures moving perpetually through this purgatory of the Protean, still at rest when active, just as the vicious are unstable even when torpid." 22 This insistence manifests itself as a dominant theatrical issue of difference whenever Morose appears upon the stage, the orchestration of which is achieved chiefly through the binary structure that is set up between Morose and the rest of the characters. Morose constructs himself as being of "another nature" to the gallants and to the press of the collegiate women, and they accordingly harass him, but there is a sense in which both ‘parties’ are arguably the constructions of each other, or are constructing themselves as oppositional to each other, normative versus grotesque. Working within an overarching structure in this way, the appearance of such a figure as Morose operates as a signifier, or scapegoat, for the problem of self and subjectivity in this culture. ‘Self’ as such is here a source of tension, a silence in itself which, when attacked and broken into as in the one instance of ‘Morose,’ threatens to ultimately dissolve all lines of identification - a crisis summed up in Morose’s final admission “I am no man.” (V.iv.40). Morose knows that the effort to ensure Dauphine’s disinheritance will be fulfilled when, as he puts it “I will get an heir and thrust him out of my blood like a stranger.” (II.v.98-9) Dauphine must literally be made strange and thrust out of the way: exposed. The irony for the individuals of this play is that the surest route to personal power is in the kind of ambivalent anonymity that

Dauphine embodies; a self that avoids suspicion, that hides within, rather than away from, the protean culture that constitutes its world-view. A "centered self" in such a context is palpably and openly strange, and problematises the illusory strategies found in that context, though as the case of Morose demonstrates this problematising need not be restricted to the one side - 'centered' as opposed to 'un-centered' - as it is the alienating barriers between them which are themselves part of the problem. In Epicoene, more than in any of Jonson's plays or poems, this gap is exposed and made grotesque, with Morose at the start of the play living by candlelight in "a room with double walls, and treble ceilings, the windores shut and caulk'd..."(I.i.175-6)

What this is really looking towards, however, is the question of what is theatrical and what is anti-theatrical, and through what channels this difference is constructed in the generation of identity. This question institutes a rising source of tension between efficacy and manipulation which is finally completely undercut by the unmasking of Epicoene at the end. 'Theatricality' itself emerges as a shifting value, operating along the same glassy lines of subjectivity as status or gender. The best way of seeing how this functions is to up-end the play and concentrate on Morose's voice, as an example, and see how he himself legitimates his own theatricality, his own eyes and voice. As a means of looking at this, I turn to II.v, the scene where Morose meets Epicoene for the first time.

- iv -

The scene is contained and filled entirely with Morose's words on the one hand, and Epicoene's presence on the other. Here, silence
and gender - and gender and strangeness or estrangement - meet. On
the stage, the focal point of the scene is Epicoene, whom Morose is
trying to incorporate into his 'theatre,' enclosing her within the
concentric web of his subjectivity. That this is a lengthy process is due
to the barriers that Morose exists within, barriers that construct a
threshold through which Morose must admit a passage, a liminal
movement from one state into another which is completely different.
This scene thus operates like a catechismic ritual of liminality, with
Morose the high priest, or play-maker, blessing a path of entrance into
his charmed circle by asking a set of questions, all three of which have
to do with self-representation and theatricality. He displays an
extraordinarily obsessive concern for measurement and balance, as if
the world should be charted to his dimensions. Epicoene must "fit...
in the place and person of a wife... in the weighty consequence of
marriage"(II.v.7,12); satisfied, Morose notes that "her temper of beauty
has the true height of my blood. The knave hath exceedingly well
fitted me without."(II.v.19-20) This scene is entirely the product of
Morose's precise imagination, and in it Epicoene is bound like a
perfectly-formed doll, his means of ensuring the disinherition of
Dauphine. Framing each question as a contractual obligation, he asks
"... she that shall be my wife must be accomplished with courtly and
audacious ornaments. Can you speak, lady?"(II.v.31-33). Morose is
careful to define the quality of 'courtly speech' as having "mine ears
banqueted with pleasant and witty conferences,"(II.v.47) that is to say,
for personal and particular consumption - an idea to which I shall be
returning. The distinction to be made is against those who "think it a
most desperate impair to their quickness of wit and good carriage if
they cannot give good occasion for a man to court 'em."(II.v.49-51).
Speech is not only a means of communication, but rather it is itself
like an ornament of value, an aspect of femininity which can be attached or detached at will. That 'the female' is here literally a performed role adds to the irony of such a construction, as well as the scene as a whole.

More important than containment in speech, however, is containment in clothing, something towards which Morose demonstrates a particular fascination. This is the subject of his final question, a question which "shall be with the utmost touch and test of their sex." (II.v.66) And the test itself?

...how will you be able, lady, with this frugality of speech, to give manifold (but necessary) instructions for that bodice, these sleeves, those skirts, this cut, that stitch, this embroidery, that lace, this wire, those knots, that ruff, those roses, this girdle, that fan, the t'other scarf, these gloves? Ha, what say you, lady? (II.v.74-9)

The question focuses obsessively on costume itself not as an inanimate set of articles, but rather as some organism that needs to be managed, and which in some way implicates - even replaces - the body beneath. It is as if the woman's costume, with its many seams, stitches, cuts, layers, openings and closures has a life of its own, though a life intimately related to its wearer: one, it seems, implicates the other, or rather one is involved with the other. The extraordinary extent of this list, for all its apparent 'completion,' betrays Morose's anxiety to be complete - that in order to control it, he must completely 'surround' and border off the female form in order to avoid any lack or fragmentation in his own form. Such is Morose's dependence on the sumptuary code, that wearer and clothing seem to become indistinguishable, and it is symptomatic of the anxiety of self-fashioning in his little world that he needs control over both. Looking at Morose's language here, it is therefore hardly surprising that the only time he refers to Epicoene's physical body, it is to
another point of opening, the lips, that he is drawn - and drawn to
close, in the terms of a legal contract. "Let me now be bold to print on
those divine lips the seal of being mine."(II.v.85) The irony of subtext
here is that in a sense Morose is right to be anxious, though not quite
in the sense that he anticipates, for Lady Epicoene's sexual identity,
within the contexts of both the narrative and the performance-
practice, is constructed entirely out of what she wears and how that in
turn is interpreted by those who see her.

It is tempting to compare what Morose is doing here with his
instructions to Mute at the opening of II.i, that here Epicoene is
undergoing this 'pre-marriage' ritual in order to be a demonstrably
acceptable servant of Morose. Morose's references to being "courtly" -
as well as the expressions of fulfilled happiness with which he
responds to Epicoene's answers - suggest, however, that the
relationship that is being established in Morose's mind is closer to one
of client and patron. He not only needs her, but he also needs her
approval, for her to be on his side, as a means of legitimately securing
his concealment, to set up his own court. "Dear lady, I am courtly, I
tell you, and I must have mine ears banqueted with pleasant and
witty conferences..."(II.v.46-7) He desires to retreat, not only into a
fictional 'courtly' relationship with Epicoene, but also 'into' culture,
into the safe haven of anonymity. The term 'banquet' at this time was
used frequently to describe the sweetmeats or 'voids' served in
banqueting-houses in the course of an evening's entertainment, and
as a term of reference in the context of the royal court was
interchangeable with the masque that had come to dominate such
events - they were both "food for the eye." 23 Even more useful to

23 Fumerton, P. Cultural Aesthetics: Renaissance Literature and the Practice of Social
consider at this point, however, is the fact that the very notion of 'banqueting' came to imply, at least in architectural terms, a paradoxical kind of proclaimed concealment, with the first banqueting-houses being withdrawing-rooms that were 'added on,' either to the roof of a house or else, as at Whitehall, as a stand-alone structure; ensuring status and yet at the same time unusually vulnerable. What Morose seems to be articulating at this point, furthermore, is his desire for Epicoene to effectively confer status upon him by literally whispering 'sweet nothings' into his ear - encasing him in a void of sound, completely insulated from the sounds of the hated city. Thus the relationship between him and her would constitute, inevitably, yet another barrier. One can imagine this scene as one which involves Morose-as-playwright summoning up a product of his imagination - his ideal woman - and then insulating it from 'acoustical disturbance,' whether in his house or from the outside, as a necessary companion in his drama, a drama of self the conclusion of which we hear rehearsed in his extraordinary 'soliloquy' at the end of this scene.

This sense of extemporised ritual, of a passage over a threshold on the journey to Dauphine's disinherintance, seems to make itself felt at every point in this scene. Significances abound: not only is Morose simply taking a wife and disinheriting his nephew, he is establishing himself as almost a king-like author of meaning, containing the flow of his capital wealth by intending to specially extend his own blood-line within a family; a family of his own creative imagination. What happens in the rest of the play, then, is practically a piece-by-piece subversion or deconstruction of the 'taken-for-granted' elements that this scene is pinned together with, which seem to settle ultimately on Morose's fear of 'the theatre.' This is 'theatre' as an expression of the
desire-to-gaze (and yell), theatre as constitutive of a culture obsessed with the desire to survey, spy, invade and expose. This fear finds expression throughout the scene - it is the unnameable essence which must be contained, which threatens to articulate itself at every turn, yet this strange oasis of a scene, this point where his fertile imagination appears to take root, allows Morose to imagine that 'it' "can bury in [itself] with silence."(II.v.56-7) In this scene Morose is the world, and his house is his theatre; insulated, contained, a newly-created body to which Epicoene appears "exceedingly well fitted." The quasi-ritual of match-making becomes, through the rhythm of Morose's catechism, a performance of incarnation or self-fashioning in a context insulated from, yet nevertheless filled with, the anxiety and destructiveness that Morose feels towards the social, theatrical world which Dauphine, and later the collegiate ladies, represent.

This scene finds its analogue or mirror-image in the final scenes of the play - V.iii and iv - which finally formalise Morose's desire to disassociate himself from all forms of social exchange, in a ritual that exacts the greatest possible cost from him. Thanks to the efforts of Clerimont and Truewit in the intervening scenes, Morose's house is transformed from Morose's personal proscenium to a space which resembles the urban playhouse stage at its tackiest, like "a play that were nothing but fights at sea, drum, trumpet, and target."(IV.iv.16) The musicians, the crowd of women, and the ensuing racket all combine to change the private, insulated space of Act Two into a public arena. Morose's own personal ritual that was exercised in II.v has set in motion a string of events that has led to the unleashing of all the most destructive and monstrous effects that the 'other' theatrical ritual can convey. It is a clamour that directly implicates him as its cause; he has no real escape, and can certainly no longer
claim that he is happily "above mankind" (II.v.64), as that would involve acknowledging the groundlings, laughing at his downfall.

One way of looking at Morose's dilemma is to say that in avoiding "turmoil, which is now grown to be another nature to me," (V.iii.51) his only strength came from maintaining that spatial distance and eschewing the symbolic relations that everyone else entered into in the interactive social world. The catechism of II.v, for all its manic style, is nevertheless a setting-up of a symbolic relation between himself and another, as a means of achieving his objective. Despite his supposed control of that situation, the implications of its having taken place take him beyond his precisely insulated space, putting him in a position where he cannot deny his own part in "nature." He too is implicated in the illusions which the stage simultaneously rehearses and legitimates.

The rituals and signs and symbols all point towards desires for fulfilment, and the metonymic 'lacks' through which these desires are channelled. From this follows the social strategies of compromise or exchange which 'ritual' simultaneously masks and displays, as the speculative player deals his or her way through the social 'pack.' As the manner of La Foole's attempts at winning primero or gaining advantage with the collegiate ladies suggests, in the midst of such a social environment ritual itself appears neverending and all-enclosing, a constantly repeating process of experiences which in being negotiated implicitly question the constitution of the self; a self which is reliant on these strategies of negotiation and displacement as a means of self-fashioning. The responding gesture of the self within such a context is to misrepresent, or misrecognise, to take the illusory image - which is itself inscribed within the formation of this self - as a key to understanding the others that surround one as well as oneself.
This idea of a fictional direction within subjectivity is to be found also in Lacan’s notion of méconnaissance as being a condition of the ego. Looking at ‘the self’ in this way, outlining an approach to “the nucleus of our being,” Lacan takes up a Freudian point: “that which [Freud] proposes for us to attain is not that which can be the object of knowledge [ie. the self], but that... which creates our being and about which he teaches us that we bear witness to it as much and more in our whims, our aberrations, our phobias and our fetishes, as in our more or less civilized personalities.”

It is here that we can see II.v as an emblematising of Morose’s ‘drama,’ effected through his own strategies of containment and display. For Morose, and indeed for Epicoene as a whole, the whole issue of identity is highly problematic as both he and it slide between the normative and the grotesque in a manner which is highly ambivalent, but which nevertheless insistently constructs him as estranged outcast, who by entering into the normative fiction of self-fashioning - through marriage, and potential fatherhood - has become his own caricature.

- v -

To twist the looking glass around, one group of characters within Epicoene vital in our understanding of the spatial contexts which the play-text enters into, are the collegiate ladies. In many ways, they present most clearly that “other nature” that Morose so desperately avoids, with their uncontained volubility of speech. On stage, they practically mirror the city’s demographic intensity, arriving

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together and leaving together as if they are a small crowd, eager to consume new wares and events. Morose’s ‘concealment’ of his marriage to Epicoene earns him scolding from Haughty the moment she enters his house: "... would you steal a marriage thus, in the midst of so many friends and not acquaint us?" (III.vi.18-19) - he has deprived them of an opportunity "to see and be seen." (IV.i.56)

The way Morose reacts to their initial arrival at his house is full of his own poetics of space: "Oh, the sea breaks in upon me! Another flood! An inundation! I shall be o'erwhelmed with noise. It beats already at my shores. I feel an earthquake in myself for't." (III.vi.2-4) Already in the course of this essay the stage has had several roles cast upon it: mirror, trap for the gaze, Morose’s theatre and courtly banqueting-house (a site where masques were also staged), and public playhouse. It is at this moment that the banqueting-house is pierced and its insubstantial walls begin to give way: seeing it at this point of transition, it is worth dwelling more on what a banqueting-house actually signified. There was very much a sense of "pleasure on the defence" surrounding these detached and exposed structures, and indeed some were even surrounded by notional retaining walls and bastions, after the style of an artillery-fort; such gestures were entirely belied however, by the large and defenceless windows commonly set on all sides of the house, and the additional balconies. As Patricia Fumerton puts it in her study, "[t]o please the eye and the self within, the banqueting-house had to make the eye/I vulnerable." 25 The same can be said for Morose’s house, though in his case the ‘window’ that he has set into his armour is a mobile one: "[h]e has employed a fellow this half-year all over England to harken him out a dumb

woman, be she of any form or any quality..." (I.i.ii.22-4) Looking specifically at the site of King James’ Banqueting House at Whitehall, it has been argued that its very ‘detached-ness’ - from not only his other pleasure zones in St James’s Park but also from the palace proper - and its proximity to Whitehall Highway (which led north to the City and south to Parliament) made it highly vulnerable to intrusion from the public both literally and symbolically. As the city - signified by the ladies - surges into Morose’s apartment, the notion of an achieved identity of privacy and the desire for status that it satisfies becomes highly problematical -

[the incessant segmentation and recession of rooms, ‘houses,’ service, stuff, and eating habits - all of which accelerated towards the end of the sixteenth century - record a privacy whose resident identity was forever elusive, unlocateable... a sugar-spun identity always on the verge of being consumed by an elusive and feared insubstantiality.  

In this sense, we can read the ‘collegiate ladies’ as functioning as a kind of nightmare-mirror for Morose, representing a chaotic fragmentation of the self that leads, at the end of the play, to his desperate claim “I am no man, ladies” (V.iv.40) - such is his apparent desire for self-displacement. As with Clerimont, then, ‘lady’ signifies a fragmented self, a point at which the self-as-metonymy and its associated desire for order and completeness is displaced by materiality and consumption. This desire-to-consume is especially associated, on the collegiate ladies’ part, with consuming with the eye. As an example of this, one only has to turn to the way in which classical - and sometimes contemporary - authors are cited in the text, as fragments of the status-culture of learning, taken in through the eye, by the aspirants to the collegiate ladies’ circle, especially Sir John Daw. Indeed, this notion of a “college” of women could well be

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26 ibid., p. 130.
implying a literary clique, on the model of the Countess of Pembroke's 'college,' made up of modern women as described by Truewit in his diatribe on women to Morose, who "censure poets and authors and styles, and compare 'em, Daniel with Spenser, Jonson with t'other youth, and so forth"(II.i.110-112). Even Jonson's name, in the midst of 'his' own play, has become a detachable commodity, an object of censure. Also, there is the notion riding here that in some sense 'selves' were like books; that the community of one sort furnished material and succour for the other.

The idea of a community of books as nourishing food for the eyes is perhaps taken to its greatest extreme in IV.iv, when Morose's utter desperation is interpreted by Epicoene as some kind of sickness: "[g]entlemen, for heaven's sake counsel me. Ladies! Servant [Daw], you have read Pliny and Paracelsis. Ne'er a word now to comfort a poor gentlewoman?..."(IV.iv.52-4) After Daw's multi-lingual exegesis on melancholy and madness, the search for a cure for Morose's 'disease' revolves around a discussion on reading between Daw, La Foole and the three collegiate ladies. It finally ends in Lady Haughty asking her woman, Trusty, whether to prescribe Becon's The Sick Man's Salve 27 or Greene's Groatworth of Wit, a confessional pamphlet that admonished playwrights. Language is something which these women have in great abundance, and their cure for any failing, it would seem, is to feed it words that it may learn to mask itself, or rather to induce a depressive effect, like alcohol. As Trusty says of her parents, "every night they read themselves asleep on those books."(IV.iv.111-12)

27 This was a popular tract which was described as being "[w]herein all faithful Christians may learn both how to behave themselves patiently and thankfully in time of sickness... to prepare themselves gladly and godly to die." cited in Beaurline, L.A., ed. Epicoene. by Ben Jonson. (London: Edward Arnold, 1967). p. 96.
In effect, the books Haughty suggests, being indices of her culture, could literally be regarded as medicinal vessels that dull, or rather displace, the senses, placing the reader in a fictional relationship with the voice that has been disembodied into words on the page. For the collegiate ladies, such a relation implies fantasies of possession and control, that the physical ownership of books - enabled by, and confirming, their economic position - in turn implies ownership of the words contained within, a process of commodification that extends beyond the books themselves and enters into every discourse of exchange. These notions of exchange and commodification indicate something of the ‘boundless market’ that the City of London in particular was beginning to embody at this time: that any ‘urban consciousness’ relied in part on the recognition that, as Jean-Christophe Agnew has put it, “[l]ife now resembled an infinite series of thresholds, a profusion of potential passages or opportunity costs running alongside experience as a constant reminder of selves not taken.” ²⁸ In the repetitious culture of acquisitive commodification, any implied reference to containment suggests, paradoxically, an absence or lack - a series that veers further away from completion with every addition or appropriation, which in turn aggravates the desire for completion. Books may provide nourishment for the gaze, but it is a nourishment that can never satisfy, leading the eye to search for ever newer surfaces elsewhere.

Frustrated by Morose’s refusal to hold a public marriage-ceremony, the collegiate ladies’ collective desire-to-gaze is obliged by Truewit, whose viciously staged gulling of Daw and La Foole occupies much of the fourth act of the play. Having made each man fear the

other, believing that the other means to exact gruesome revenge for some supposed wrong-doing, Truewit is able to expose the empty superficiality and self-interest of their supposed friendship: this is the ‘text’ of the gulling. The most significant stage direction of the whole exercise is the entrance ‘above’ of the collegiate ladies, along with Epicoene, Otter and Trusty, escorted by Clerimont. From their perspective, they are not only able to view the disclosure that Truewit has specifically staged, but also ‘see’ Dauphine take on Daw’s and La Foole’s mantle of ‘brave and valiant wit.’ As is being made patent from the other sides of the stage, however, this theatrical event can be described as a “project” (IV.vi.9) in both senses of the word. Not only is it an attempt to demonstrate the meaninglessness of the gulls’ friendship, but it also turns on its head the notion of authorial authority - of implied judgement from ‘on high’ - that underlies such a text as Jonson’s, by staging a specifically contrived perspective: and staging it in such a way that its effect can in turn be ‘seen.’ In this way, Truewit/Jonson stage the gaze, allowing ‘it’ to occupy the stage as as much material principle as dramaturgical device. This is a gaze, furthermore, which Truewit acknowledges to be a trap - or rather, regards as an acknowledgement of the reciprocal ‘entrapped-ness’ that the ladies’ point-of-view implies. Seeing, the action that dominates the self and the formation of selfhood in Epicoene, is now itself thrown up into high relief in a grotesque action that mirrors its ambivalent reciprocity, in that both parties are equally deceived, in a way mutually beneficial to the third party, Dauphine.

When discussing the effectiveness of this project later with Dauphine, Truewit argues that the ladies, like an audience, “are governed by crude opinion, without reason or cause; they know not why they do anything; but as they are inform’d, believe, judge, praise,
condemn, love, hate, and in emulation one of another, do all these things alike." (IV.vi.56-60) They are seen to be made by what surrounds them, by each other, by the city, by men - in short by others and by otherness. What draws them initially to Morose's house is after all, the novel and strange apparition of a "silent woman," who not only turns out to be able to speak, but also can be said to "have wit," a possession which makes her a potential collegiate herself. Their dependence on otherness can be followed even further, however. It is the Lady Centaure who perhaps exemplifies the "hermaphroditical authority" (I.i.76) of the collegiate ladies, having taken on not only the name, but apparently also the reputation of the - exclusively male - beasts of classical mythology, having "immortaliz'd herself with taming of her wild male" (IV.iii.25-6). Similarly the brief argument over precedence and place in the collegiate pecking-order that flares up between Mavis and Mrs Otter in III.vii could well be seen as comparable to the petty struggles for power that constituted the politics of clientage in the royal court.

To broadly generalise the gender role of the collegiate ladies, it is they who play the 'male' role of speculating, appraising and making approaches, with the unambiguous ultimate intention - once their eyes are set on Dauphine - of an erotic encounter. Indeed, Lady Haughty openly uses the language of colonisation in describing to Dauphine her desire to know him 'inwardly' - "I assure you, Sir Dauphine, it is the price and estimation of your virtue only that hath embark'd me to this adventure" (V.ii.1-2). Having previously been pictured by Daw and La Foole as "[a] very shark" (IV.iv.147), this 'strange, new land' that Dauphine suddenly represents is celebrated by the ladies as if a veil had been lifted: "... how our judgements were imposed upon by these adulterate knights!" (IV.vi.1-2). Yet
simultaneously, this lifting of a veil, with the new clarity that that implies, appears to find its formation in a paradoxical masking, or making strange. It is as if in the discovery of Dauphine-as-eligible-target, Dauphine himself becomes a shape, an other that must be ‘mined’ or ‘uncovered,’ a “spectacle of strangeness.”

The ladies approach him by seeing him as other, composed of others, of fragments - he is, as they say, “judicial in his clothes... [with] every hair in form... such a nose!... such a leg!... an exceeding good eye... [a]nd a very good lock!” (IV.vi.22,25,33-6).

Otter imagines his wife, a “pretender” to the collegiates, in a comparable way, as constructed out of purchaseable consumer goods: “... her teeth were made i’ the Blackfriars, both her eyebrows in the Strand, and her hair in Silver Street... [s]he takes herself asunder still when she goes to bed, into some twenty boxes, and about next day noon is put together again, like some great German clock...” (IV.ii.82-4,87-9).

The self that is envisaged in such a way can be seen quite literally to exemplify what Lacan termed the “triumph of the gaze over the eye.”

This is a gaze which can only be detected when its physical counterpart, the eye, is tricked, such as in the example Lacan gives of the trompe l’œil, the painting of a veil that succeeds so well that the viewer is prompted to ask what is behind it. Mrs Otter operates in Otter’s eyes as pure metonymy, a collegiate-in-waiting, enshrouding herself with the material fragments which designate her desired identity. For her, at least as Otter sees her, it is this distancing process, this alienating constructed-ness which is the accessible side of the set of social practices and identities to which she aspires. Viewing

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such a discourse of in-corporation, deception and displayability of self, one can see an analogy to the practice of theatre itself, in that theatre as a cultural form ultimately relies on the legitimation of a collective 'gaze,' a gaze that divides, distinguishes and collects. Every surface in the theatrical context, therefore, functions within this agency of 'the gaze,' and in turn displays its fragile materiality, so that the 'desire-to-see' itself institutes a mini-culture wherein status is ironically conferred on those who visibly achieve concealment, who construct the self as a veil. This is a process which in Epicoene becomes as material and palpable as the stage upon which the play is performed.

The collegiate ladies, in such a context, are entrapped indeed. Seemingly unable to distinguish between the eye and the gaze, their every appearance onto the stage revolves around strategies of visibility to such an extent that they are the very costumes that they wear. Within this process of 'trapping' others the ladies simultaneously trap themselves, caught by the necessity to conform to the limits of their own signifying strategies. Truewit gives an example of this sensibility at one extreme, citing one "poor madam [who], for haste, and troubled, snatch'd at her peruke to cover her baldness and put it on the wrong way"(I.i.122-4). Containing herself in order to 'be seen' by her sudden male visitor, her self functions as container, ideally finished and observable, though a self which in this case must speak "with... reveral face"(I.i.127). So what lurks at the edge of this field? I would maintain that this fragile limit is marked - and at the end of the play, transgressed - by the string of events set off by the barely visible figure of Dauphine as the suspension of disbelief, unstable already, silently unhinges itself.
Truewart's assertion that "a wench to please a man comes not down dropping from the ceiling... he must go where she is" (IV.i.58-61) is questioned by Dauphine; he replies "yes, and be never the near" (IV.i.62). As has already been seen, it is Dauphine who is approached and propositioned by the ladies - not the other way around. The mere fact of his refusal to do so operates on several levels, all of which have to do with the dynamics of gender and gender-relations that exist in this play. Dauphine doubts that one can ever be "near" women in any context, when in order to be successful, one "must approach them i' their own height, their own line... If she love wit, give verses, though you borrow 'em of a friend or buy 'em to have good. If valour, talk of your sword..." (IV.i.88,91-3) In order to be "near" women in this way, it would seem that one has to displace oneself, to become as much a representation as she is. To break with such a contract, to pointedly avoid approaching them "in their own line" is, as Truewart himself demonstrates, to usher in the situation where "she presently begins to mistrust herself" (IV.i.87) - that is, mistrust her discursive formations. What is at stake in Dauphine's mind within the context of such an exchange is not only the sense of his own 'manliness,' therefore, but the whole nature of masculinity itself, the privileging platform from which such subjective strategies of female gender-fashioning are observed. In this scene Dauphine is articulating the intention that, like Morose, he desires to contain and preserve himself from the dissolving ambivalence, the play of self-fashioning, that threatens to melt away his borders, and to do so unnoticed. The fact that he succeeds where Morose completely fails, however, is paradoxically due to the sense of utter ambivalence out of
which he emerges through the play, an irony which tells a great deal about the theatricality of excess upon which so much of the dramaturgy of this play is based.

Dauphine's method, or camouflage, is first suggested by his name. Jonson's allegorical method of naming characters after their natures or after their respective roles in the narrative is clearly present in Epicoene, as it is in all of his other plays. Truewit arguably is 'true wit' personified, just as Morose's character falls easily within the definition of the Latin morosus. Dauphine's full name - Sir Dauphine Eugenie - is translateable as a woman's name, literally 'Princess Eugenie,' a name which threatens to belie Dauphine's own rather tenuous role within the play as heir apparent. Could it be that Dauphine is the authentic 'epicene,' possessing the undeniable habit of a male but happily allowing himself to be addressed as a woman? Seen in this way, there is a clear disjunction between name and appearance, a disjunction not only unresolved, but also generally unnoticed - a disjunction which operates by the overlapping and obscuring of the 'unwanted' information, namely, the feminine gender of his name. Tacked onto the front of this is his - apparently purchased - title, a title which asserts his masculinity and advertises his (financial) nobility. In addition, however, this little title can itself be seen to assert the 'nobility' of masculinity, noble even in the scientific sense of the word: that like a 'noble' metal, designated thus because it resists oxidation, so masculinity is the 'inert gender,' a secure 'inertia' which even the mere presence of a three-letter title can ensure.

Gender, as a pre-inscribed mimetic code legitimating appearance with a name, serves more than any other system of signification to confirm the subject's place within the symbolic order. It is an outer
surface, a form which stands at the crossroads between appearance and reality, between the conscious and the unconscious. What does it contain? How can it figure on its surface the very invisibility of its hidden contents? What formative structures have mediated its outward appearance? The very process of objectifying the subject into external and internal modes that divide and alienate the self - in order that the subject achieves some sort of stability - comes into question, not only in terms of the mythic structures entered into by the strategic requirements of the surface form, but also in terms of the whole notion of ‘interiority,’ and what needs it creates and serves.

The characters in *Epicoene* furnish gender with an extraordinary materiality; gender becomes a commodity, but seemingly a commodity that can only be shed, not exchanged. The gender role performed by Dauphine Eugenie is characterised by a surface confusion and ambiguity; his female name, his male role and station, and his somewhat emasculate social behaviour all combine to deflect attention away from any notion of his authentic ‘self.’ He becomes, in a sense, his own prop. The body - here figured as a point of authenticity - that which gender supposedly signifies, is so undemonstrative as to be virtually insignificant, removed beyond signification, and indeed the trickery and confusion which he perpetrates is generated entirely by costume and the play of costume alone, as he demonstrates at the end. In this way Dauphine articulates the degree to which the gaze can be effectively deceived by resisting visibility. Even when he attracts - or rather, has attracted for him - the notice of the collegiate ladies, he maintains this neutrality, this uttermost displacement, whilst the women praise his “exteirors.”

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His seamless veil effectively makes him an 'offstage' character, drawing attention away from his gaze, by which I mean it enables him to mystify - silence - the conditions of his own formation and subjectivity. Completely the opposite of Morose in this respect, there is nothing about the way he operates that offers a surface or border to be transgressed. Apart from the beginning of I.iii when he tells off Clerimont, or the scene from IV.i described above, the moments in the play where he ventures any sort of difference, either of opinion or action, are few and far between.

The main depiction of Dauphine that emerges in the play - apart from the collegiate ladies' discussion of his visible body-parts - is in Morose's 'soliloquy' at the end of II.v, and then we are subjected not so much to a picture of 'Dauphine' as the figure of "it knighthood," Dauphine's disembodied title. In the midst of Morose's tortured syntax, there nevertheless emerges a rather disturbing portrait of this gallant knight. Maybe his title is all there is to him:

he would be knighted, forsooth, and thought by that means to reign over me, his title must do it.... Your knighthood itself shall come on its knees... it shall be sued for its fees to execution and not be redeem'd... It shall fright all it friends with borrowing letters, and when one of the fourscore hath brought it knighthood ten shillings, it knighthood shall go to the Cranes or the Bear at Bridge-foot and be drunk in fear... (II.v.99-112)

This may simply be the language of a highly irrational and neurotic old man, yet it nevertheless brings into question the central conceit of the narrative: that Dauphine needs money, and in order to gain money he must somehow overcome Morose's disfavour. But why does Dauphine need the money? To help pay the dues for his purchased knighthood? To maintain his 'lifestyle'? Morally, the balance can all too easily swing against his favour - in order to gain the sympathy of his audience and his peers, he must have a scapegoat, and that scapegoat is his competitor Morose. But once Morose is out
of the way, what is Dauphine going to do? At the end of the play, Dauphine has emerged as that greatest of roles, the victorious gallant, only instead of it being a culminating point of his demonstrably great theatrical powers (which it isn't), he instead closes the play as quickly as possible and departs from the focus at centre-stage. One could argue here that in demonstrating the hollowness of the theatrical illusion and the ease with which its conventions have allowed him to achieve victory, he also displays the emptiness and apparent meaninglessness of his own victory and vengeance.

What has happened? To look at Dauphine as a discrete character, a figure that articulates his own space upon the stage, he is extraordinarily difficult to 'see': Dauphine-as-mirror distorts and confuses, scattering light into fragments. In him, or rather on him, the gaze fails, it slips away without gaining any purchase. At the beginning of Act Five for example, with his design all but complete, he nevertheless appears entirely subservient to Truewit, heading off at Truewit's word to silently fetch Morose, as if he were a butler. He restricts and contains his own 'theatrical' activities to the barest minimum, reprimanding Clerimont's lack of restraint in I.ii with "[c]ome, you are a strange open man to tell everything thus." Dauphine, in this light, perverts the gaze utterly, constructing it purely as invasive voyeurism. In another way though, his aversion/perversion can be seen to operate as an acknowledgement of the incompleteness of the gaze, of the innate failure that the desire-to-gaze papers over, which involves the struggle implied in Lacan's "triumph of the gaze over the eye." At the play's end, the rapidity with which he secures its dénouement and the dispatch of Morose and Epicoene could be said to recall the destructive ritual that marked the end of a masque-performance at Court; as Jonson put it in his
preface to *The Masque of Blackness*, “the rage of the people, who, as a part of greatness, are privileged by custom to deface their [masques’] carcasses” (ll. 6-7). The stage would be charged, the scenery torn down, the masquers stripped of their rich costumes.\(^{32}\) The desire to possess and uncover - to have an uncluttered, fly-on-the-wall-style view as seen in many of the characters’ objectives underlies much of *Epicoene*, with both the strategies of subjectivity that the ladies enter into in order to effect this and the interpretative strategies that Truewit and Clerimont in turn respond with, as Truewit’s grilling of Clerimont in I.ii demonstrates. Dauphine takes these strategies and objectives a step further than anyone else on stage, and in discovering Epicoene, Cutbeard and Otter, discovers the nothingness at the core of the play, the incessant exchange of consumable selves, like so many worthless coins. Effectively, he furnishes a sight that constitutes far more than ‘the gaze’ could possibly have bargained for.

What is Dauphine then? Who is he to take the stage and turn it into a graveyard of discarded, empty figures? As I have tried to demonstrate, he is a character distinguished by his invisibility, deflecting the gaze elsewhere, despite the supposedly important position that he plays in the narrative, and the extraordinary effect that his actions have in effectively closing the play down at the end. It is as if, following on from the contemporary practice of allegorical interpretation, of the figure as opening-point of vision, Dauphine and his final action represent something - something unacknowledged and avoided. Certainly the strange shift that Truewit’s final speech manifests - to the subject of Daw and La Foole - would seem to confirm this. Truewit, the ‘play-wright,’ like a wheelwright or

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shipwright, one who constructs plays out of such 'matter' as Daw and La Foole, repeating the same sequences and disclosures again and again, in the light of Dauphine’s discoveries begins to look much like the playwright that Jonson damns in one of his epigrams: "Two kinds of valour he doth show at once:/ Active in’s brain, and passive in his bones." He is a character so much of the theatre, that the deeply anti-theatrical deconstruction that he supposedly has just witnessed - which has effectively split the stage in two, or even dissolved it into fragments - leaves him helplessly scrambling for a return to mastery that narrative repetition, like the servant’s protocol in Morose’s house, rehearses for him. Truewit, floating in a nostalgic haze for a narrative that has lost its signification, finally appeals to the audience, the last vestige of 'theatre' that remains.

The audience too, however, are implicated, they too can be seen as 'play-wrights' in the extent to which their passive presence maintains and legitimates the theatrical conceit. They, like Truewit, fail to acknowledge the desire-to-gaze which they all subscribe to and rely upon, which the theatre in effect emblematises. Dauphine, a character consumed by his obsession for Morose's wealth, and possession in general, can be seen to operate along the same paths as the gaze itself. Like 'the theatre,' Dauphine is a product of the city, that tight gathering of I's and eyes all jockeying for precedence and patronage. In gaining Morose's wealth, he has satisfied what the gaze desires as its achievement: entrance to a privileged site of exchange, at the opportunity-cost of displacement and disembodiment. Like the "Town’s Honest Man" of Jonson’s epigram, he is not so much matter as principle, "Being no vicious person, but the vice/ About the town;

and known too, at that price." As a theatrical character, theatrical in the sense of expressive, of embodying images that open outwards, Dauphine expresses the failure of theatre to do anything other than deceive people, to present a disfiguring, disembodied vision of life. Dauphine, in effect, brings death to the stage, emptying the characters on stage of any meaning, so that when Truewit delivers his final speech, it is in the presence of eleven actors, all boys, who stand inert and silent, whose roles have to varying degrees been invalidated.

This idea of the anonymous presence of death is certainly not inappropriate for Epicoene. It is, like the first four acts of The Alchemist, quite clearly set during the time of the plague, a time when people with wealth left the city for their country estates, and during which large gatherings - especially theatre - were banned. Indeed, this very play was performed at the end of a quite lengthy plague year, when deaths had continued into the winter months. Morose's obsession with sealing out noise could well be seen as an effort to seal out the plague, to insulate himself from that greater silence, death. In turning his house into a house of 'making,' however, it becomes - as has been seen - open to being filled up with people, like a theatre, and with this gathering comes deceit and intrigue. The social contact of the city, the press and jostle of the crowds, means that any object of any value to anyone becomes open to commodification, subject to the competition of the 'market' and all the strategies of speculation and dissimulation that that entails. The city here becomes a site where not only living-space, but indeed everything, including communication, including even life itself, is compressed, limited, measurable, commodifiable.

34 ibid., "On the Town's Honest Man", ll. 5-6.
This materiality locates the city as something which not only contains attractive objects of desire, but also creates them, a creation that owes its emergence to the negativity of differentiation, the apparent lack that manifests itself in the materialised, speaking subject, faced with a multiplicity of selves to take up in the pursuit of personal ‘market’ dominance. Returning to Lacan’s discussion of the gaze, this negativity can perhaps be best seen in terms of “the envy that makes the subject pale before the image of a completeness closed upon itself, before the idea that the... [alienating spectre of the self] from which he is hanging may be for another the possession that gives satisfaction...”36 The gaze furnishes for the eye a sight that tantalises and makes desperate - a desperation that can never be satisfied, leading the eye on and on - as Truewit says in the opening scene, “not seeking an end to wretchedness but only changing the matter still”(I.i.51-2).

The gaze dis-figures, dissolving and compartmentalising the self in an unseen way, speaking out only in the deceiving speech of a bargain-hunter: non speech, speech at a price. In a similar way, the plague spoke out through its victims’ final silence. A thing to be avoided, it could be said that Jonson uses the plague as an unseen cipher for the void of self that he so insistently associated with the theatre, as it most keenly indicates the potential for crisis in the urbanised self, being a perennial feature of the urban context. Through Truewit’s anachronistic final speech, Jonson the shaper, maker, poet could be said to be articulating the point where the gaze fails, the blurred threshold at the edge of the field of focus, the drama disorganised into an order that works against theatre. The eye, the

very point of creative power and self-awareness is itself being seemingly expressed in this withholding, in the refusal to provide a receding, ordered perspective, instead causing the looking self, the spectator/audience-member/reader, to see reflected back the lack that it itself has cultivated through the formation of the self. In the final moments of the play, the gaze has no choice but to switch, unsatisfied, from player to player, from shell to shell.

At the end of the printed edition of this play - first published as a part of Jonson’s Workes of 1616 - the name of the company and the principal actors are listed, a practice repeated for all the plays in the Folio. Unlike most of the other playwrights working at this time, Jonson did not contract himself to work for one particular company as a means of gaining financial return from his script-writing. Instead, writing for the public stage was for him a part-time affair, and he was unique amongst writers in that he exercised some freedom in choosing which companies - and which theatres - he was to write for. It is therefore at this point that we meet the focus of this thesis, the performance of plays by the boy companies, a performance-context for which this play was specifically aimed, and which this play can in some senses be seen to be using, reacting to and addressing. The chapters that follow will take up specific issues from the performance-context that have been already been broached in the discussion of this play, opening outwards from the very specific perspective on theatre that it presents. Essentially the question surrounds the semiotics of the private-theatre stage - when going to see a performance by a boy company, what did the audience expect to see? How did they see? What sort of sights were they shown? Why, essentially were they used at all - especially by Jonson, for the intensely demanding and uncompromising theatre that Epicoene presents.
Siting the Stage

From thence, far off he vnto him did shew
A little path, that was both steepe and long,
Which to a goodly Citie led this vew;
Whose wals and towres were builded high and strong
Of perle and precious stone, that earthly tong
Cannot describe, nor wit of man can tell;
Too high a ditty for my simple song;
The Citie of the great king hight it well,
Wherein eternall peace and happinesse doth dwell.

As he thereon stood gazing, he might see
The blessed Angels to and fro descend
From highest heauen, in gladsome companee,
And with great joy into that Citie wend,
As commonly as friend does with his friend.
Whereat he wondred much, and gan enquire,
What stately building durst so high extend
Her loftie towres vnto the starry sphere,
And what vnknown nation there empeoled were.

(Spenser, The Faerie Queene, I.x.55-56)
Beginnings

HAVING WATCHED a play, let us now turn to look at the space which the stage itself occupied, and those other spaces which had a direct bearing on the way in which the stage operated. What I am trying to uncover here is not only the spatial contexts that the theatre's stage emblematised and represented - and the immediate social context that the theatre itself presented - but also the idea that these 'contexts' were themselves 'texts,' a phenomenology of place interweaving the signification and imagination of power, and of "the function of inhabiting". The stage in effect operates as a kind of spatial intertext, overlaid with many different guises, and it is through understanding how these functioned that one can begin to see how the private theatre, the theatre of the boy companies, operated as a signifying environment.

It is perhaps best to begin with the companies themselves and the space which they had been accustomed to occupying, as a way of approaching the space cleared for them in the expectations of their audiences. In this way, one can try to retrace the steps that Jonson took which initially brought him to Blackfriars from the Globe, where in the prologue to Cynthia's Revels (1601), he had hopes for the "gracious silence, sweet attention,/ Quick sight, and quicker apprehension" of the new auditors to his characters. As will be seen, the stage of the boy companies appeared to possess a privileged status - albeit paradoxical - and this privilege can be seen to be articulated through reference to specific sites in the imagined, as well as real,

spatial environment, into and out of which I shall be structuring this chapter: the court - and especially the locales of firstly hall and then banqueting house located within it - the church and the city itself. The boy company that performed *Epicoene*, like the boy company that earns derision in *Hamlet* - the "eyrie of children, little eyases"\(^3\) - was a company of court entertainers that had been re-formed around 1597-1600, made up of choristers of the Chapel Royal, who performed in a private theatre in the top floor of the Blackfriars priory. Similarly, the other major boy company of this period, the Children of Paul's - Cathedral choristers who performed in a temporary venue within the Cathedral Close - were re-formed in a revival of all-child acting around 1600. It should be noted that both these commercial ventures were revivals, and that there was indeed a lengthy history to the performances of entertainments by all-child casts.

One could go back as far as the 13th century, to the earliest records of the ceremony of the Boy Bishop that was held in seemingly every cathedral and abbey in England on Holy Innocent's Day,\(^4\) with its carnivalesque reversing-of-roles between clergy and choristers. In a more general context, it is likely that students from local grammar-schools were involved in the performance of mystery plays held annually in market towns on Corpus Christi, though there is little evidence for this dating before 1500. The earliest recorded performance of a play by boy actors was at Winchester castle in 1487, when the birth of Henry VII's first son, Arthur, was celebrated with the performance of a play of "The Harrowing of Hell", by a group of local choir-boys. Through the 16th century, the popularity of such

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performers becomes more commented upon, and up until the 1570s, the most popular performances by child-actors were those put on up and down the country by the local schools. The most famous of these were the Whitsun plays given by the grammar-school at Shrewsbury, which even attracted Queen Elizabeth to make a progress to see them in 1566.\footnote{ibid., pp. 21-2.}

During the early sixteenth century, the Children of the Chapel Royal first come to notice as a company through their appearances as singing angels, mermaids and other allegorical figures in court pageants, such as the one which celebrated the young Prince Arthur’s next rite of passage, with his marriage to Katherine of Aragon in 1501. The most important development at this time, in terms of the work of the Chapel children - as well as the growth of courtly entertainments in general during this period - was the appointment of William Cornish as master of the Chapel Royal in 1509. During his tenure, performances of pageants by the Chapel Children and Gentlemen, involving staging, singing and dancing, and from 1515, acting, became a frequent, though not regular, Christmas event at court. From 1548, however, the frequency of performances at court began to increase as the Children of Paul’s - thanks to the efforts of their new master Sebastian Westcott - emerged as a strong competitor to the Chapel Children, having previously only made occasional appearances at court. In the 1560s and 70s, companies made up of grammar-school students from Westminster School - where the young Ben Jonson would later attend - and Merchant Taylors School also performed plays at court.
Initially sporadic appearances in the years of the first Tudor monarchs, led with increasing momentum through into Queen Elizabeth's reign, when the royal court attracted an increasing range of royal entertainment that marked not only the celebration of the Christmas season, but also the festivals of Candlemas and Shrovetide. The extent to which each respective company was seen at court seems to have depended very much on the enthusiasm and talent of the individual Master at any given time, but the general trend was favourable, as the Queen encouraged these talented additions to the celebration of festivities. This increasing popularity of and familiarity with the performances of such interludes at court had a significant flow-on effect, as a new trend - the performance of these plays outside court - began to emerge in the 1570s. The details of this shift are sketchy, and it is tempting to see it in purely commercial terms, with the two main companies cashing in on their respective successes at court, and the resultant kudos, and so presenting these same shows to the public eager to sample the courtly ambience, as a means of earning revenue. This is an important element, but I would suggest that it is an element only, as throughout this period it was the performances at court which remained the central focus of the companies' work, and it would be a mistake to take the term 'rehearsal' which they attached to these performances too lightly. Clearly the increased competition - and the scope of the plays which they were producing - meant that a specific, sizable rehearsal space was becoming a greater priority, particularly in view of the patronage-umbrella that, for Master Westcott at least, was at stake in these court appearances.6

Out of a mixture of motivations, then, the first boy companies came to perform in the city of London. By 1575, the Children of Paul's had set themselves up in their own stand-alone venue somewhere in the precincts of the Cathedral, and it is at this time also when the first complaint was laid against them. As reported to the Court of the London Common Council, "one Sebastian [Westcott]... keepeth plays and resort of the people in great gain, and peril of the corrupting of the children with papistry..." 7 A year later, the Master of the Children of Windsor Chapel and - temporarily - of the Chapel Children, Richard Farrant, obtained a lease for rooms in the former Blackfriars priory, knocking out partition-walls to make a large rectangular hall: the first Blackfriars Theatre. Again, the first notice we have that plays were performed here is through an official complaint, this time by the owner of the property, who had been led to believe that the rooms were to be used solely for teaching.

The apparent subterfuge with which these first theatres were set up, along with the harsh indignation with which their performances were sometimes received, perhaps gives some indication of the degree to which the City was already divided insofar as its orientation towards the space of the stage was concerned. This controversy emerged even though both of the actual sites were on Church property, and therefore outside the jurisdiction of the City. Objecting generally to the sheer travesty of representation that the stage - and especially the stage-players - signified, this division of opinion can in turn be seen to point to the emerging tensions between the steadily growing middle-class mercantile community, and the court, that seemingly undissolvable constellation of power and privilege.

Identifying the boy companies as signifier of this split was a connection quickly made: apparently as early as 1569 a (non-extant) antitheatrical pamphlet entitled The Children of the Chapel Stripped and Whipped alleged that “Plays will never be suppressed, while Her Majesty’s unfledged minions flaunt it in silks and satins. They had as well be at their popish service, in the devils garments... feigning bawdy fables gathered from the idolatrous heathen poets.”

Many contentious issues are already being rehearsed in this very piece, not the least of which being how the theatre - this theatre - and the plays performed were being perceived; what ‘role’ they were seen to play on that larger and altogether less forgiving stage, the City itself.

From Church to Hall; the rise of the Court

Having given a brief resumé of a particular aspect of theatre history up until the 1570s, it is now time to enter more deeply into the spatial contexts which were being developed and utilised. Already I have briefly indicated a clear break between the theatre of the city - London, and in particular, Whitehall - and the outlying country, with its network of market-towns. The city is itself worthy of specific comment, and I will be moving towards it later in this chapter; for now it is sufficient to see the distinction between the church-based religious theatre of the country and the more ‘literate’ theatre of the city, which was still evolving. This is a theatre which found its origins spatially in the hall, microcosm of and immediate precursor to the court: a gathering-space where servants and household could be mustered, fed or entertained, a privileged social site from whence the

power of the household could be asserted and dispersed. This theatre's textual origins emerge from that intellectual and cultural shift known as 'humanism,' whereby the traditional division of virtues and vices that constituted pre-modern thought were implicitly reassigned as rhetorical indices within what Agnew terms "the sphere of commodity relations," their formation subject to the structured cycle of rhetoric which was a rhetoric of 'supply and demand,' forging principles and stand-points which could be quite mixed in their character.9

These imaginative grounds for the staging of representation were mirrored in the shift that occurred in the dispersing of power. Just as the mystery-cycles, with their processional staging of Time itself from Creation to Doom ceremoniously enacted a spiritual charter or decree, so the power of the king was effected through the dependence of his vassals upon him for their lands and titles. Vassals were the very limbs that ensured and performed the king's power: similarly, the mystery-plays operated as an emblem of civic and professional pride, as the Corpus Christi procession through the urban space to its centre, the cathedral or abbey, essentially 'performed' the city - the city as part of the body of Christ, a relationship symbolised in both the architecture and the siting of the cathedral. By the end of Elizabeth's reign, however, power was being dispersed from the royal court along a network of patronage and clientage. This network operated both ways as a kind of contract-based relationship that legitimated each party within a fictional relation that effectively managed the uneven spread of power in such a way as to avoid the potentially anarchic oblivion that open factional conflict for

9 Agnew, Worlds Apart, p. 56.
power between members of the court threatened. The power-structure of the court operated through a mass of representational rituals that instilled extraordinary vigilance in its members: interpretation through speculation was a skill vital for survival. This balance of dependence and suspicion exposed its dangerous underside to its victims most graphically at points of transition, such as the fall of a favourite from the monarch's side demonstrates:

the fall of a favourite was not just a personal matter. Simply because he was a favourite, Somerset\textsuperscript{10} held the key to grants of money, offices and titles, and many men attached themselves to him, became his 'clients' or 'creatures', and thereby linked their fortunes with his own. If he were to fall, they would go with him, unless they switched their allegiance. Timing was the problem.\textsuperscript{11}

The characters who occupied the theatre-stage with their mixed and sometimes hidden motives, similarly exercised both eye and mind. As the writer of *The Children of the Chapel Stripped and Whipped* implied, by the second half of the 16th century that king of cities, London, was itself no longer a unified expression of devotion but rather an ideological conglomerate of shifting values and spaces, with both the body and the mind of the monarch removed to a space that the writer feels he cannot share. Indeed, the pamphlet allows the writer to actively remove himself, to declare the site of a distinct and seemingly unbridgable gap between where he stood and what he saw occurring at such events, through speculating upon the activities of the players as if they were commodities that the crown enjoyed.

To view the players and their plays as commodities is itself not quite so far-fetched as it may seem. It was common - at least during Elizabeth's reign - for the conclusion of the court-performance of a

\textsuperscript{10} Robert Carr, Earl of Somerset, was favourite to James I from about 1612 to the rise of Buckingham in 1616, and acted in concert with the pro-Spanish faction in court.

play to be marked by the presentation of a specially-printed copy of the play-text itself, encapsulating the performance into a basic fragment of commodity-exchange, a book. Similarly, the company of players were employed, and handsomely paid for, as court-entertainers, a job-description that itself 'performed' and commodified the means of courtly leisure. The roles which were performed in the plays were themselves regarded not as enclosing a single principle of decreed devotion, but rather as individual principles in themselves, principles engaged in the debate that the play itself addressed, and which therefore implied partiality and competition, but with compromise and conciliation as ends in view.

To look at how this operated, it would be good to choose an early example of a boy company's performance in a courtly setting, and then follow this use of space into the competitive market of theatricality that emerged after the establishment of the Theater in 1576. The first favourable review accorded the performance of a play by a boy company was recorded in 1528, after the Children of St Paul's School had given a 'recitation' of Phormio, by the classical Latin author Terence, at a banquet given by Cardinal Wolsey. The reviewer, and guest-of-honour, was an Italian named Gasparo Spinelli, secretary to the Venetian Ambassador in London. He had a reputation as an accomplished and well-read diplomat, and he was apparently astounded by the quality of the actors' elocution.\(^{12}\) This idea, that the performance of this sort of play was essentially a demonstration of the children's rhetorical and elocutionary skills is backed up by the styles and manner of the plays performed, and is an oft-cited explanation for the popularity of these shows, both inside

\(^{12}\) Gair, *Children of Paul's*, p. 75.
and outside court. This argument can be best summarised by a contemporary account, that of Sir James Whitelocke, who had been an actor in the Merchant Taylors School productions: "I was brought up at school under Mr Mulcaster, in the School of the Merchant Taylors in London... Yearly he presented some plays to the court, in which his scholars were [the] only actors, and I... among them, and by that means taught them [i.e., us] good behaviour and audacity."\textsuperscript{13} The mention of "audacity" by Whitelocke itself suggests, however, that what was on show was not only a drilled exercise in rhetorical technique, but also a spectacle of nascent selfhood; a spectacle of formation as much as of form, as the fresh voices cut through the air.

Given the rapidly emerging role that rhetoric was playing in court and public affairs, the apparently neutral attitude that the early children's shows attracted deserves closer scrutiny. The first plays put on in public by the boy companies were classed as 'rehearsals', during which they performed the same repertory as they performed at court. When rehearsing their skills in front of a paying public in this way, in the intimate surroundings of a small city venue, it has been said that their shows "offered the self-flattering illusion that one was a participant... in a form of courtly entertainment."\textsuperscript{14} This begs the question of what else was being 'rehearsed'. What was "courtly"? What was "entertainment"? How were these notions being legitimated? And what constituted the self, furthermore, that was being flattered? To have one's self flattered by the illusion that one was a participant, in a spectacle that only required one to look and applaud, is to privilege that gazing self which we encountered in the

\textsuperscript{13} Chambers, \textit{The Elizabethan Stage}, Vol. 2, p. 76.
\textsuperscript{14} Shapiro, M. "Children's Troupes: Dramatic Illusion and Acting Style" \textit{Comparative Drama} 3 (1969), 46.
previous chapter. To be flattered for seeing, or to experience the illusion of pride associated with being somehow ‘responsible’ for what one saw on the stage, implies that this sight has been formed and anticipated by the gaze, and that it follows the same order of signification as the self flattered by it. Stanley Fish, discussing the performance-context of the court masque, makes the point that

[O]ne can no longer say... that the spectators are taken in or deceived by a contrived illusion, for they are themselves the cause of what they see; and in order to make a "censure true" they need only recognize themselves. There is no distance between them and a spectacle or representation of which they are the informing idea; the relationship between viewer and presentation is not one of subjection and control, but of identity; they are, in essence, the same, and because they are the same the court saw in the mask [sic] "not an imitation of itself, but its true self.”

In short, the illusion operates as an image of that self, so that the self and the spectacle are all of a piece, not separated by any mediating fabric of otherness, much as the spectacle of the court masque ‘was’ the court’s true self in its staging of perspective and of the king’s virtue.

At this point we should return to 1528 and Cardinal Wolsey’s banquet, held to celebrate Pope Clement VII’s escape from Holy Roman Emperor Charles V’s besieging of Rome; as well as, subtextually, Wolsey’s own diplomatic role as ‘international peacemaker.’ The hall was edged with allusions to this event in the form of Latin mottoes, and at the front of the hall, where the boys performed, there was a “garland”, framed by the mottoes (here translated) “war gives way to diplomacy”, “the peace treaty will not be overturned” and “in honour and praise to the peacemaker”, the latter term referring to Wolsey’s title ‘Cardinalis Pacificus.’

15 Fish, “Authors-Readers...”, p. 136.
16 Shapiro, Children of the Revels, p. 75.
Wolsey the beneficent host, but also to Wolsey the principle, Wolsey-as-peace. I would argue that a crucial index to this spectacle of self-fashioning would have been the children's performance, as they not only articulated the teachings and ideals of classical learning, but also the supposed recovery of eloquence in general that the revival of classical texts signified at this time. The eloquence or 'artful speech' itself points to some highly ambivalent possibilities, however, much like the ambivalence of theatre as self-flattering participation. This particular performance of the integrated rhetoric of Wolsey's self, with its attention to the Italian fashion for such revivals of classical forms, presents for Spinelli a generous and visible compliment, which in turn serves to underline the cosmopolitan idealism upon which Wolsey's household was constructed. Complimented with a performance of perfectly enunciated Latin verse, Spinelli in turn compliments Wolsey, in that these talented boys are a credit to him. In this way, the storehouse of rhetoric that the performance of Phormio made a clear gesture towards is continued in the discourse of compliment that it was effectively a part of, all taking place in an emblematic chamber that was both fashioned by, and fashioning of, the protagonist who inhabited it.

Jumping forward in time, we can link this experience to the example given above, of the paying spectator being offered the flattering illusion that such a performance conferred courtliness upon him or her. I would in turn argue that such an implied participation was being constructed within specific lines-of-sight, or rather lines of desire. Gathered together in a select site within the City of London, the spectators were able to 'see' what courtiers saw, by which I mean not only the bare fact of the performance itself, but also the opportunity to cast themselves within the circle of pleasing rhetoric,
of dispute and resolution, as members of a speculative community, whilst avoiding the disposable self-will which the courtly contract entailed. Entering into this fiction of aristocratic selfhood was also aided by the sheer fact of inactivity and idleness that spectatorship entailed: one was being entertained, and was also a vital part of that entertainment. This is a participation that imitates and commodifies the strategies of self-construction of the courtier or the monarch, allowing the self to retreat into a symbolic realm. The value, and even the identity, of this new commodity was, however, difficult to quantify. What was being participated in, then, amounted to more than any sense of the event itself, but conversely to an emerging strangeness, even alienation, of self. This participation relied upon and confirmed an ambivalent sense of selfhood, to a self that could enter into - though never transcend - existing structures of signification.

In the ‘Interlude’ or ‘debate’ theatre of the early 16th century, the abstractions of the various vices and virtues were being encapsulated - and problematised - into composite social types and negotiable principles. Similarly, the actors themselves, both adult and children interluders, could be seen to negotiate their way through several roles in the course of such a play, taking on and putting off roles as the story demanded. This offers quite a contrast to the situation in the older, popular forms of drama still being practised in the market towns where as many as a dozen or more actors would have played the single role of Christ in the York cycle of mystery-plays. As such, this new development directly refers to the constraints of space that the hall placed upon the players and their play. The need to maximise the space available and to ensure that the presentation of the play was not disturbed by the ‘off-stage’ mechanics of costume-
changing thus re-organised the playing-space, and the form of the drama, away from the panoramic displays afforded by the older forms of drama, and into the episodic form of developmental plot, with a story that - along with the non-static relationships between the characters - could be seen to unfold. Limited spatially, the resultant division between ‘seen’ and ‘unseen’ segments of the dramatic presentation, combined with the undivided attention and close proximity of an audience, invited further segmentation at different levels. With notions of ‘unfolding’ and the temporary, interchangeable nature of the emblematic characters, roles that could be taken on and put off at will, the plays themselves embodied not just ‘any - i.e., no - time’ but instead a specific ‘historical’ period, a limited pocket of time enacted within a pocket of space. This theatre presented individuals on its stage who could only be partially-realised because of this shift in visibility, due to both the likelihood of a staged retreat to the tiring-space and also the way in which roles were more blurred and less fixed. Instead of presenting a moral problem to be addressed or solved within the frame of the play, the forms of interlude-dramas began to become something partial themselves, offering audiences the chance to pit their own speculative and judicial skills against those of the characters on stage. Indeed, much of this early drama, which initially employed adult actors as well as children, was set within the form of a structured dispute. In the case of Medwall’s *Fulgens & Lucrece* (1497), for example, an extended invitation is made to the audience at the conclusion of the entertainment to ‘amend the play’ following its debate on true

nobility, during which the characters have been habitually misrecognising or commenting upon one another.

The learning, forming selves that the boys as actors presented visibly reflected upon the split between rhetoric-as-principle - the idealistic fount of the humanist educational project - and the rhetorical self: formation and form. The rules are followed, yet in so doing they are also being explored. It should be noted that despite the fact that no manual on acting was written in England at any stage before the English Civil War, one of the most fascinating industries of the 16th century was the extensive development and production of manuals on social behaviour and appearance, which ultimately had the effect of constructing every social encounter as a potential fiction, a point where the self could be held up at a distance and judged on its performance. The most well-known and frequently-emulated of these manuals, Castiglione's *Il libro del Cortegiano* (1529), constructed an aesthetics of society, an insulated society based on a metonymic economy of style that directed its efforts towards the fashioning of outward elegance and grace. In its translation into English, the parameters of this metonymy were themselves seen as a codified set of political guidelines, with their carefully contrived screening of the conflicts and strategies within courtly power-play. As with fencing, dance or poetry, the cut and thrust of political ambition had become a complex signifying structure that could not only be taught, but that indeed demanded close study and practice. Within this way of thinking the plays or interludes presented an early example of this order of signification. The channeling of the Machiavellian energies - seemingly released by the dissolving of the feudal order - into the rhetorical model of disputation, signified a practice of social
performance that these plays both encouraged and, to a degree, explored.\textsuperscript{18}

Returning to the work of the boy companies themselves, it is clear that through the 16th century they extended and developed their courtly dramaturgy, as more complex forms and uses of genre came into play, and the plays themselves challenged the abilities of the actors, both in terms of sheer length and of the range of characters and situations depicted. Common elements remained throughout, such as the use of structures of debate, music - reflecting the boys' high standard of musical training - and spectacular stage effects and characters such as storms, pyres, and gods.\textsuperscript{19} Though touring groups of adult professional actors also played a part in the development of courtly entertainment, the work of the boy companies functioning as a kind of 'off-shoot,' by the end of the century it is apparent that it was the boy companies who had, in their performance-practice at least, retained their 'association' with the court. The opening of the Theatre in 1576, and especially the subsequent proliferation of such venues that followed in the 1580s and 1590s, had the effect of concentrating the work of the adult companies in London to the space of the public stage: the "wooden O's" of the Rose, the Swan and so on.

Though the names of their companies declared their continuing links with courtly patronage, the theatres within which the adult companies performed were the new, purpose-built public arenas, open to the sky and gathering large numbers of spectators in galleries and on the ground on three - in some instances all four - sides of the huge, thrust stage. The smaller halls of Blackfriars and Paul's, however, would have been able far more faithfully to present a

\textsuperscript{19} Shapiro, \textit{Children of the Revels}, p. 170.
courtly-style ambience, with the artificially-lit interior spaces accommodating a far smaller number of spectators - all of whom would have been seated - in an acoustical space small enough to allow for the playing of lutes and viols, and the singing of songs.

Looking at some of the plays these early boy companies performed, we can see that both John Heywood’s *Play of the Weather* (1533) and Richard Edwardes’ *Damon & Pythias* (1564) provide useful models of dispute-drama, the two being structured around the rhetorical framework of thesis and anti-thesis. The former is a succession of pleas and disputes held before the throne of Jupiter, whilst the latter debates the nature of true friendship. In both plays, the symmetrical structure of thesis and anti-thesis operates through both material and characters in a way comparable to the staged joust at a tournament, each group of characters playing off the other until a suitable conclusion is reached. This comparison is perhaps not so distant as it seems at first sight, as by the sixteenth century the joust had been transformed from the blood-sport of previous centuries and had itself become a highly theatrical, staged event, an event which was indeed “seen by the middle of the sixteenth century as [an] allegorical and mythological [staging] of the struggle for worldly power.”

Within the formal dispute-play, then, the sense is of the opening-out of a wide and clear perspective, of the play as both sign and cipher - a knot which when untied reveals a vista of apparent completeness and order. At the conclusion of *Damon & Pythias*, Pythias delivers what he imagines to be his last words in a final oration on the value of friendship to Dionysius and his court,

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thanking the gods that he can now "die for my friend, whose faith, even now, I do not mistrust". But he receives a temporary stay of execution as Damon runs onto the stage and holds back the executioner's blade, and so the two friends debate with each other as to who shall offer himself up for self-sacrifice in the name of friendship. The view that is opened up can be seemingly infinitely magnified within its lines of perspective; the individuals may perish, but the form through which they articulated and experienced their lives survives them, encircling and informing their actions.

Exploring, and experimenting with, the form and order which constituted theatre and was in turn emblematised by it, can be regarded as the most challenging project of much of the work written for the boy companies to perform. The rapid evolution and risky experimentation that I would argue distinguishes the boy companies of the early 17th century has, in a recent study, been claimed for these boy companies of the Tudor period, and this precedent can be seen to have been directly due to the privileged space of the court that they were able both to play in and explore. It would seem that

[n]ot only did they popularize drama where it mattered most, that is, where evolution was possible, but they established its form, they alerted both playwrights and playwrights to the varieties of material that were susceptible to dramatic treatment, they demonstrated that plays could cross class barriers to engage the inheritants of both traditions [the classical revival and the popular drama], and they provided the model for an effective playing space.  

An early example of this is another play of John Heywood's, entitled *The Play called the Four P.P.: a new and a very merry interlude of a palmer, a pardonner, a potycary [apothecary], a pedlar* (1520), performed at court by a company that comprised both adult

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21 quoted in Shapiro, M. *Children of the Revels*, p. 141.
and child actors. It takes the dispute-form and transforms or reworks it into a piece of vernacular drama, as four rogue-type characters, having given up their initial subject of the most certain means of salvation decide instead to have a debating-contest on which one of them can fabricate the biggest lie. This is no subversion or satire of the classical disputatio as such, but rather the composite nature of the play allows it to operate as a means of exploring this form by developing and casting it within an open arena of dramatic action or staged improvisation. In so doing, such a play can be seen to test the boundaries of the space within which it is allocated to perform, by bringing into the plataea of the Hall a form of theatre that questioned the very grounds of theatre - and the theatrical metaphor of social action - through the unconventional possibilities that it offered, yet from a standpoint nevertheless within the moral precepts and ideals of the form itself.

Though the Palmer delivers the last and best lie of all, none of the others agree to serve him, so that there are ultimately no winners or losers. There is a further reason behind this draw, however, for as the Pedlar explains, "... every virtue, if we list to scan,/ Is pleasing to God and thankful to man." As the play itself reaches its conclusion, it is revealed that the very form of the lying-contest has been conceived as being within a metaphor that grows out of their initial problem of the surest means of salvation. "Maistrye" as such is ultimately not a means of technology, or of form alone, as every 'means' is equally virtuous yet equally incomplete.

The formal structure of disputation remained as an important element in the plays of the boy companies through into the reign of

Queen Elizabeth, yet the scope of the plays themselves expanded to incorporate the discrete features of the more static modes of court entertainment that the boy companies had also been involved with, namely the flattering royal figures, ornamental elements from classical mythology and emblematic staging that had been a feature of the court pageants. In plays such as John Lyly's Endimion (1588) or Campaspe (1584), the collective dramaturgy of court entertainment is formed into an inclusive exercise in courtly loyalty. Here, the formal pattern of dispute is broken up and enlarged, with parallel plot structures allowing the dispute itself to be viewed from differing perspectives, as different sets of characters are presented from different angles according to social position. Characters 'overlap,' propelling the narrative onwards through nets of juxtaposition, intrigue and counter-intrigue, though characteristically the plots are virtually actionless, with the ultimate triumph of principle over emotion. The cast of Endimion, for example, is made up of six couples: Endimion/Courtly Lover loves Cynthia/Elizabeth, the Moon Goddess, Goddess of Chastity; Tellus, the Earth Goddess, loves Endimion; a soldier called Corsites woos Tellus; Endimion's friend Eumenides loves Semele; and Dipsas, the sorceress is courted by the braggart Sir Thopas, who must make do with her maid Bogoa, as she is already married to Geron. What little action there is basically involves Endimion being cast into an enchanted sleep by Dipsas, and then being awoken thanks to a magical water.

In amongst this theatrical and intellectual dispute, the relationship between ruler and subject remains constant, and is indeed presented as an ideal model - an unmalleable principle of devotion and loyalty. Endimion's devotion can never be fully
satisfied, as the object of his devotion is removed irrevocably beyond his ken:

ENDIMION: Such a difference hath the gods set between our states, that all must be duty, loyalty, and reverence; nothing (without it vouchsafe your highness) be termed love...

CYNTIA: Endimion, this honourable respect of thine, shall be christened love in thee, and my reward for it favour. (V.iii.149-51, 160-1)

Both Endimion and Cynthia ‘see’ themselves in the gap that separates them, but the real difference is that we are allowed to see that this is a gap that affects each party differently, along status-lines, that form, for all its inclusiveness, can in fact divide. The reward of “favour” that Endimion receives from Cynthia at the end of Endimion is not depicted as a means by which the aspiration and inner conflict that he articulates at the opening of the play can be laid to rest. Once within the rigidly hierarchical structure of the Moon-Goddess Cynthia’s settled court that Lyly’s work poses there can be no solution to the problem of ‘aspiration,’ of achieving self-recognition in any different sphere - or space - of signification, such as that which ‘the moon’ symbolises. Endimion’s idealism and audacity is most clearly expressed in the opening scene of the play, when comparing himself with Eumenides: as he says, “follow thou thine own fortunes, which creep on the earth, and suffer me to fly to mine, whose fall though it be desperate, yet shall it come by daring”(I.i.73-5). Joel Altman sees the journey that Endimion undertakes through the play - and indeed the journey of the play itself - as being one which unfolds in a manner so oblique as to be reflective of the strategies of deferral and self-displacement which constituted the problematic

network of power-relationships that existed within the court. Endimion’s sleep signifies the self-annihilating state of inertia that his obsession with the unattainable leads him to, stuck between the unacceptable life of a courtier and the impossible dream of being able openly to declare his love for Cynthia. When asked directly by her to answer for his actions in the judgement of the final scene, he cannot compromise his devotion to her, instead insisting on his loyalty and reverence. Combining justice and mercy, Cynthia assimilates what she understands about Endimion and draws it into a more general picture, allowing his respect for her to “be christened love” but nevertheless making it clear that having settled the intrigues of her court, Cynthia expects Endimion to redispone his desires elsewhere if he is to fulfil his role as citizen and courtier.25

In this way, the very setting of the court, a stage of privilege and ceremony of which this play is itself an expression, becomes a kind of text or pretext: an entity which despite appearances is not pre-ordained, but instead was balanced tenuously within the threads of an all-too-delicate allegory of supremacy. The rehearsal and exploration of space which the plays of the boy companies entered into is a project which was taken up on their return to the stage in the late 1590s with an even greater attention to the limits and margins of representational and ideological efficacy, as the court itself was subdividing and retreating from view ever further.

The philosophical ideal of rhetorical argument that is articulated in plays modelled on the classical style - as interpreted by the early 16th century humanists - can be seen to simultaneously derive from and give rise to an ideology of ‘all-encompassment’: a principle of

inquiry and division which finds its centre, just as it was to later in Inigo Jones’ masque-stagings, at the throne, the ultimate vanishing-point. *Campaspe*, with its more direct structure of inquiry and ultimate judgement, perhaps pushes this even more strongly with its theme being acted out as an ideological joust over the nature of true kingliness, as viewed by Alexander the Great. Here ‘kingship’ is examined and reformulated, but it is an exercise in self-fashioning that never calls into question Alexander’s self, instead reasserting the duties and place of the monarch’s subjects. As discovered in the play, kingship is here articulated not only through the king’s power to command others, but also as a symbolic principle of self-government, as Alexander avoids any possibility of a clash of personal sentiments.

The function of the actors themselves in such an environment was one of showing or demonstrating, playing their roles perhaps like musical parts; denying or effacing themselves whilst emphasising their skills. As performed at court by a company of boy actors, these plays operated as demonstrative rehearsals of courtliness and kingliness, with the actors, through their literal self-effacement, both implying and interpreting the role of favourite. They serve as virtual mirrors of the monarch’s virtue, deflecting the minds of the privileged audience away from the performances and back onto themselves and their own ‘self-government,’ as subjects to the Queen, ever-reliant either on her, or her favourite’s favour as a means of aspiring to some sort of ‘self-advancement,’ with the implied possibilities of bestowing one’s own ‘favour.’ During this period in history - and even more so during the reign of James I - the ‘favourite’ implied the key relationship of patronage that ran through every level of court-life, extending beyond the boundaries of the court itself and into every area where royal or courtly authority had influence in
the distribution of power, however nominal. The monarch's favourite was a literal extension of the monarch's presence, or a point of reference; like a filter or a mask, he became a means of 'seeing' the monarch's face, either illuminating the king's or queen's greatness, or - as some saw the relationship between King James and his favourite the Duke of Buckingham²⁶ - treacherously smothering the monarch's true wishes. Around the favourite, in turn, ran intricate networks of power, influence and intrigue: the client-network.

Taking this power-relationship a stage further by invoking the divine right of kings, of the monarch as symbol and agent of divine rule, one could see the favourite as a kind of priest, ministering the power of the king amongst his clients, affirming the communion of the court. Extending this image outwards, the favourite/‘priest’ performs the role of theatrical interlocutor between ‘God’ and His people, a point of contact but also a signifier that confirmed the irrevocable distance between divine will and human desire. To follow a later court-tragedy, Bussy D’Ambois (1604), one might well ask whether such a figure “[i]s... only great in faction?/ Stands he not by himself?”²⁷ His “faction” in this case is the very ideology of monarchy and patronage that this figure relies upon and in turn legitimates, as what we are talking about here is not any individual favourite, but rather the idea of the favourite, idealised and rehearsed - and subverted - in the figure of the boy actor.

Cardinal Wolsey's banquet of 1528 demonstrated how the troupe of boy actors operates on the level of gilded servants, or even props, a personal stage machinery appropriated on behalf of an aristocratic

²⁶Lockyer, Buckingham, p. 83.
spectacle of power and self. As theatricality or "self-fashioning" proliferated as a predominant mode of cultural and social discourse through the 16th century, such a relationship became even more transparent as the audience - especially the courtly- and private-theatre audiences of the boy-companies - became more and more visible. This 'visibility' emerges not only in the high social standing or close physical proximity of this audience, but also in the increasingly 'self-conscious' attitude of the performers themselves. The prologue written for the combined Chapel Royal and Paul's boys' Blackfriars performance of John Lyly's Sapho & Phao (1584) states:

We have endeavoured to be as far from unseemly speeches to make your ears glow, as we hope you will be from unkind reports to make our cheeks blush. The griffin never spreadeth her wings in the sun when she hath any sick feathers; yet have we ventured to present our exercise before your judgements when we know them full of weak matter, yielding rather ourselves to the courtesy which we have ever found, than to the preciseness which we ought to fear. (Prol. 13-19)28

Distancing themselves from themselves, this ensemble - spoken for by one of their number - are above all endeavouring to be imperceptible, and asking the same of the audience. What is above all feared is "preciseness," or division, which would draw attention to the gap that exists between actors and audience, and which is now being openly acknowledged. It is as if this audience has to be trained in the courtly art of 'being an audience', to find in the action of seeing the ability to be courteous, the measure of which the actors themselves will provide. This achieved, the two groups can see and construct themselves in the subjective generosity that they extend to each other, an act of courtesy that inevitably entails a loss- or displacement-of-self.

Twenty years later, this self-reflexivity and 'fragility' of presentation is located not so much in the general setting of performance, but in the more localised commodity of the individual body of the actor, or the physical site of representation. The prologue to *Bussy D'Ambois* comes across as a highly specific commentary on the context of its performance, and the availability of actors:

To quit our claim, doubting our right or merit,
Would argue in us poverty of spirit
Which we must not subscribe to: [Nathaniel] Field is gone,
Whose action first did give it name...

........................
... a third man with his best
Of care and pains defends our interest;
As Richard he was liked, nor do we fear
In personating D'Ambois he'll appear
To faint, or go less, so your free consent,
As heretofore, give him encouragement. (Pr. 13-16,21-26)

The audience's own strategies of self-fashioning came to be associated more and more with such social activities as the attending of private-theatre performances, and the roles which they appropriated in social situations became more and more commodifiable, as the increasing proliferation of character- and even physiognomy-handbooks - even more than the earlier manuals of court behaviour - testified.29 How one spoke and appeared could affect one's 'value' or 'worth', an attitude which placed importance upon the self in terms of the discursive formations it entered into and constructed itself within, concealing and displacing the individual within a private sphere: an action which itself could confer status. This crucial cultural shift favoured not so much representation as misrepresentation, and relates to Lacan's notion of *méconnaissance* which was used in the previous chapter with regard to the construction of a 'visibly individual' identity. This places the work of the child actors at a

highly sensitive point, in that their theatre - or rather, the theatre in which they performed - visibly articulated nothing less than a dramaturgical objectification of the rhetoric of integrated selfhood.

As has been pointed out, the figure of ‘the favourite’ occupied and privileged a space of transition between the source and the ultimate executors of power: in many ways, therefore, his was the most privileged and desired position of rank in the court, with the potential to mediate or manipulate the power-balance between the various factions and cliques within the court to a degree beyond that of even the monarch him- or herself. The favourite stood at an in-between position in the court, representing a threshold between devotion and power in his privileged access to both the public and the private spaces occupied by the monarch. This privileging of the mimetic figure that stands betwixt and between, representing the power of the other and otherness, presents us with the phenomenon of liminality. The notion of the liminal is derived from Arnold van Gennep’s study of rites of passage in relation to the structures of festivity, and further developed in the study of ludic and symbolic culture instituted by Victor Turner, whose ideas I will be dealing with in more detail in the next chapter. The liminal marks a point of transition from one social ‘state’ to another within a communal context, and thus it figures as an element in the construction of identity within particular social co-ordinates or roles. In the context of early modern culture this liminality takes on a mimetic role which mediates the construction of social identity through the experience of ‘otherness’ within a normative structure.30 In many ways the favourite was the most definitive courtier, embodying the possibility

30 Bristol, Carnival and Theater, pp. 35-7.
of direct devotion and service to the monarch - of growth - to advantage, which in turn enhanced, energised and concentrated the sociability of the court, as the conflict between factions was mitigated by acts of loyalty and power dispersed along lines of patronage.

The liberal position of the liminal conversely confirms, therefore, the structure from which it feeds, and in turn legitimates the strategies of self-fashioning that are established within it. In Turner's understanding of the liminal, however, there was the possibility inscribed within the liminal of its reinvention or recreation as something quite fragmentary or marginal, a phenomenon which he described as "liminoid." As a form, the liminoid is quite self-conscious and potentially parodic, taking the collective experience of the liminal and converting it to a partial, specific phenomenon, with its own idiosyncrasies. In the liminoid moment, form questions itself, or as Michael Bristol suggests,

\[\text{[i]n a liminoid event the participants are likely to find their experience of solidarity and communal affiliation in the idea of a radical departure from or resistance to the constraints of the social structure.}^{31}\]

It is this point in the culture of early modern London that theatre, and in a particular way the theatre of the boy companies, begins to occupy. The privileged performers who played in the courtly banqueting house and upon the private-theatre-stage self-consciously deferred every aspect of their performance, by which I mean the spatial and ritual context of its presentation and the contents of the performed text, to the rightfully judgemental gaze of their audience. Every aspect, that is, except for the highly self-conscious act of performing itself. In presenting themselves in their prologues as 'unworthy to the task at hand,' it should be noted that what is being emphasised as

\[^{31}\text{ibid., p. 38.}\]
a key, objectifiable issue in the performative context is not the content or intent of the script as much as the precise manner of its showing, the assumptions and expectations of which are inscribed within it. How can identification, with a role, a normative principle, or a character, be enacted? What this theatre was beginning to demonstrate, almost despite itself, was that of all the philosophical and political issues that were competing for articulation, none were so prodigious or controversial as the very act of representation itself.

It was this, surely, that the boy actors, with their high singing voices and still-growing bodies, could best offer the increasingly competitive marketplace of the London theatre of the early 17th century. In using the prologue as a means not so much of introducing the script as preparing - perhaps even rehearsing - the audience for the performance at hand, the actors are doing nothing more than any other professional company of tradesmen would, in that a contract - such as the one literally read out in the prologue to Jonson’s *Bartholomew Fair* (1614) - is being stipulated. Two parties agree to enter into a collaborative fiction of identification within a set space and time, a contract which this theatre seems in some instances almost compelled to refer back to, as if to confirm itself, or rather the grounds of its formation. This ‘contract’ can, however, be seen also to mirror that same order of obligation that so enthralled the court to gather at the feet of the monarch. In this way, therefore, it can be argued that in this theatre the liminal rituals associated with deferral, representation and misrepresentation - within the context of the court and in the wider social context of the city at large - were in time being converted into a liminoid commodity of quantifiable worth.32 The

commodity in question was the means and possibility of self-fashioning, or the act of representation: ultimately the figure or fabric that stood in between roles and mediated their difference.

Blackfriars Theatre as a venue

At this point I’d like to negotiate a brief detour in the midst of this discussion to dwell upon the specific theatrical and social space located at Blackfriars, the venue used by the company variously known as the Children of the Revels, Children of the Queen’s Revels, and Children of the Chapel. The old priory at Blackfriars had formerly been a monastery, and was still classed as Church property, so that it occupied the almost unique position of being within the city boundaries and yet beyond the jurisdiction of the city authorities. Thus, the edict banishing theatres outside the city boundaries to outlying areas could not be enforced, just as it could not for the Children of Pauls’ venue, which was situated somewhere in the precincts of the Cathedral.

Two theatres were built in the Blackfriars building, the first lasting from 1576 to 1584 and the second, and most famous, from 1596 through to the closure of the theatres in 1642. The second Blackfriars theatre was built in the Upper Frater, a great chamber which occupied the upper storey situated over the paved hall of the Priory. This chamber, which had been divided into seven rooms, was re-opened to reveal a space of some 33.5 metres by 14 metres, of which the theatre took up all of the width and almost two-thirds of the length. The entrance to the theatre was up a stairway which

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33 This section is based on Andrew Gurr's discussion in The Shakespearean Stage 1574-1642, 3rd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp.154-160.
presumably opened out into the auditorium at the opposite end to the stage. The stage itself would have measured only about seven metres across, half that of the outdoor playhouse stages at the Fortune or the Globe,\textsuperscript{34} thanks to the reduction in space incurred by the building of boxes for the audience on either side of the stage. The audience encroached further onto the stage with the seating of those gallants who paid extra for the privilege, and prestige, of viewing the show from stools on the side of the stage. As there was no direct access from the auditorium to the stage, however, these patrons would have found their places by entering the stage just as the players did, from the tiring house behind the stage.

Leaving the tight alleys and streets of the city, the spectator would enter the building at street level and ascend up into the candle-lit arena of the theatre, as one would the private city lodging of a gentleman. This parallel can be seen echoed in \textit{Epicoene} I.iii, when La Foole arrives at Clerimont’s house at street level and must wait to be admitted to the private lodgings ‘upstairs’:

\begin{quote}
CLERIMONT: Sir Amorous La Foole

BOY: The gentleman is here below that owns that name.

CLERIMONT: ‘Heart, he’s come to invite me to dinner, I hold my life.

DAUPHINE: Like enough. Pray thee, let’s ha’ him up.

\textsuperscript{I.iii.43-6)}
\end{quote}

Sadly this passage cannot be properly cited as a direct subtextual reference to the place of playing as by the time \textit{Epicoene} was put on the boy company that performed it had had to shift from Blackfriars to the smaller, ground-floor venue at Whitefriars. Nevertheless, such a depiction of private space even in terms of indirect analogy still

\textsuperscript{34}“[James] Shirley claimed in 1640 in the prelude to \textit{The Doubtful Heir} that the Globe’s stage was ‘vast’ in comparison to the Blackfriars.” Gurr, \textit{The Shakespearean Stage}, p. 157.
points to an understanding of living-space, and the theatre, in terms of the individual's private, as well as public, identity. During the Elizabethan period, the early boy companies had used the city venues as rehearsal-spaces and as means of extending the prestige that they gained from performing at court. In their Jacobean manifestation, however, these companies associated themselves far more with the property-based social power of the city, and with the construction of privacy as a means of gaining status - and vice versa - that came with it. In this world, even the very streets of London from whence the audience had come could, on the stage, furnish prodigious sights. In pointing us past the court and on into the threatening strangeness of the city, the theatricality of privacy and leisure gestures towards an inward retreat of subjectivity - of self-detachment - that had begun in the court. To trace this journey more fully, we next pass through that most displaced and displacing of social spaces, the banqueting house.

**In Retreat: from Hall to Banqueting House, and out into the City**

By the beginning of the 16th century, in the realm of the aristocratic country-house that lay beyond the immediate areas of city and court, as well as in the royal palaces, the Hall had begun to sprout architectural supplements, as its role as a site of consumption and community came under increasing strain and modification. The Hall's original purpose as the principle room of the medieval country-house, where the entire household came together to eat a communal meal had already been subdivided by the 15th century, as the family and guests of the house shifted upstairs to dine in the 'great chamber' away from the servants. This movement, however, led to a
proliferation of the subdivisions of such rooms into ‘public’ and ‘private’ spaces, and to the spread of other withdrawing-rooms beyond the great chamber. By the end of the 16th century, this development had reached its height, with the great chamber in Whitehall, as a prime example, subdivided into supplementary zones of increasing retreat. Elizabeth, and James after her, usually dined in a privy chamber that lay within a presence chamber which Henry VIII had had constructed within the original great chamber as a more private re-placement of its role.35

One particularly arresting offshoot of this spatial revising was the development of the detached banqueting house. At this time, the term “banquet” could refer to both the sumptuous, many-coursed meal that it solely refers to now, as well as a more specific feast that has slipped out of the modern performative-context of a meal, namely the consumption of the ‘void.’36 The ‘void’ in this instance refers to a course of decorative sugar moulds and other sweets, along with spiced wines, that was served whilst the main dining table was being cleared or ‘voided.’ Originally served to guests standing in the great chamber, the serving of the void was withdrawn into a room one step beyond or within the main chamber, where a select few were able to consume it in less formality. By the second half of the 16th century, this very function had defined its own space, as is apparent in the physical splitting-off of the banqueting-house not only from the series of withdrawing-rooms and presence-chambers, but from the very structure of the house, with the whimsical construction of such little chambers at the margins of the house proper, either on the roof

35 Fumerton, Cultural Aesthetics, p. 113.
36 refer OED listings for “banquet, sb.1” (I, p.937, sense 3), “void, sb.2” (XIX, p.734) and “voidee” (XIX, p.737).
or else somewhere in the garden or park. Reading this new location for its spatial signification and reference, Patricia Fumerton reads out of the context of Hardwick Hall’s turret-like banqueting-house a dramatising of the revisioned aristocratic self, that “the defensive turret of the medieval house, in which the lord held ‘secret house’ to count his treasure, had by now become a pleasure house for private consumption.”37 The calculating of status through the measuring and containing of accrued wealth gave way to the detached subjectivity of the void, where ‘status’ and ‘self’ operated through strategies of detachment and segmentation. The new poetics of discrimination that informed the consuming of void-meats came ultimately to be made manifest in all stages of the menu, as seen in the development of a specialised table service of plates and utensils for the banqueting house, and the reduction in the amount of spiced foods consumed in the main courses. Staging a partitioning of experience within the communal context of the shared feast in this way initiated a breaking away from the public expression of consumption: no longer were hands all dipped into the common pot, as the experience of seeing and tasting food became an increasingly personal statement and event.

As a signifier of status generally, the banqueting-house became not only fashionable as an architectural feature perched on the margins of the aristocratic lodging, but the activity of pleasurable and privileged consumption that it signified also caused it to operate as a kind of index of the desires of the aspiring middle class. Cookbooks for these ‘sweetmeats’ or ‘comfits’ increased in popularity during the final years of the 16th century and into the 17th, “addressing a...

37 Fumerton, Cultural Aesthetics, p. 115.
general audience under the fiction that all were aristocrats⁴⁸ and so providing a possible means of 'bridging the gap' between their hunger for status and the desired signified itself, allowing a retreat into a private subjectivity that modified and to a degree hid the boundaries of consumption.

An alternative name for the banqueting-house was the 'prospect room,' which reflected the fact that they were often sited on raised areas - either a roof or an artificial mound in a park - that offered a view of surrounding scenery. Indeed, 'view' was one of the most important activities that took place here. The laid-on sight of attractive sweets vied with the recessional perspective available through the typically sizable windows for the attention of the eyes of the banqueter in a way that imitated and rehearsed a particular way of seeing: one that constructed the individual at a single, ideal point of detachment - the vanishing-point. Pointing to a retreat of 'self' that could be repeated any number of times, into any number of subdivisions in the search for privacy,

banqueting houses and the food they housed nourished a subjectivity that separated itself from publicly centered forms of living. Such subjectivity was not accessible, common, or a part of a whole. It was select, displaced, apart. It flourished, we may say, in an aesthetics at last wholly metonymic. Subjectivity was a part: a detached or merely contiguous room rather than a whole house, a seasoning rather than a whole meal, a feast for the eyes rather than for the whole sensorium. Between part and part, self and self, was only the void.⁴⁹

I would argue that one place that offered a significantly similar experience was the select hall of the 'private' theatre. Though the press of bodies in the fixed seating positions of this venue may seem to be a strange comparison to make with this space of privilege, these two sites - as both imagined and real - can be regarded as powerfully

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⁴⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 125, 166.
⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p. 128.
suggestive 'intertexts' of each other. Superficially, the comparison is striking; both the Pauls⁴⁰ and the Blackfriars venues were architectural segmentations or retreats from the main structure that housed them. Furthermore, the entertainments offered within them were often couched - as the prologues quoted a few pages back exemplify - as pleasing "food for the eyes [and ears]," constructing its audience as ideally-trained, privileged 'spectator.' The banqueting-hall of Whitehall was the place where the boy companies performed at court, and it came to serve also as the venue for masques, that well-documented theatre-form that so encapsulated the subjectivity of the court; in some contexts, even, the terms 'masque' and 'void' were interchangeable, equally delectable offerings served after the main meal.⁴¹

This whole ethos privileged the cultivation of privacy and detachment, through which the self emerged only to absent or separate itself in a staged declaration of status. Fumerton's discussion of banqueting houses in relation to the Jacobean court masque is situated within an overarching argument about how the 'trivial' or 'trifling', such as the sweetmeats of the banqueting-house, operate as cultural fragments which point towards the construction of self and subjectivity in early modern English culture. She finds in the dark, cramped staircase leading to the elevated detachment of the banqueting house an analogy to the gap or "void" that existed between the self's public and private subjectivity, a gap which the action of privileged withdrawing drew attention towards. In the

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⁴⁰ Reavley Gair interprets what evidence remains of this playing-space as being situated in a wooden structure built into one corner of the chapter-house precinct, on the south side of the Cathedral. Gair, R. The Children of Paul's, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 46-67.

⁴¹ Fumerton, Cultural Aesthetics, pp. 139-140.
midst of this threshold, or liminal, experience, "[t]he aristocratic self... experienced a breach... so radical that it at last beheld within itself an open void." 42 This self-consuming void, an effect of subjectivity and self-fashioning around which this identity was centered, gave birth to the profoundly trivial and insubstantial self that the masque discovered upon its stage, and which was stripped of its costume in the violence with which the stage was rent after the conclusion of the performance. 43 This destructiveness, echoed as has already been suggested in Dauphine’s actions in the final moments of Epicoene, emerges from an understanding of the self whereby its only authentic action is one of ‘making void.’ In my reading of the theatre of the boy companies, this experience of fragile role-playing and the alienation that ensues from it is to be found in the indoor stages of the private theatres as well. The tension contained within the liminal experience of self-fashioning, or of entering into a new state of self, found its most private guise in this “void” of self.

At this point the contrasting statuses of public playhouse, private theatre and courtly masque begin not so much to blur as to inform each other’s limits and possibilities. Unlike the masque-stage, the private theatre was not truly ‘private’ in that it had no particular occasion to serve, such as a marriage or the everpresent virtue of the monarch; it did not owe its creation to its audience in the way that the masque did, but at the same time, it is difficult to see its spatial dramaturgy as being an exact replication of the dynamics of the public

42 ibid., p. 112.
43 This ‘consumption’ of the banquet/masque is discussed in Fumerton, Cultural Aesthetics, pp. 160-162. “Jonson’s one brief allusion to this customary ritual, in his preface to The Masque of Blackness (1605), recalled “the rage of the people, who, as a part of greatness, are privileged by custom to deface their [masques’] carcases” (ll. 6-7; my emphasis). Particularly suggestive is Jonson’s term for the masque body: “carcass.” Even before it was made void by the all-consuming “rage” of the public audience, the private masque was in a sense dead, a decaying corpse.” ibid., p. 161.
playhouse. In attempting to quantify a difference between the indoor and outdoor playhouses, what I have in mind is not so much the idea of a 'coterie audience' that was somehow 'better,' but rather a performance practice that was working to a different agenda.

In discussing public playhouses - with which he includes 'private' playhouses - Stephen Orgel posits a model of the public playhouse as

built by producers and theatrical entrepreneurs, the directors of theatrical companies, and its audience is their creation. The public theatre will be successful only to the extent that individual citizens, potential spectators, are willing to compose themselves into that audience the producers have imagined.44

The audience generated by such a theatre as the private playhouse would in this regard have been more keenly aware of the strategies of aristocratic selfhood as a matter taking place within an entirely private framework of subjectivity. Selfhood on the private stage is not so much a matter of life and death as speech and silence or presence and absence, an aspect necessitated in part by the fact that the conditions were considered too cramped for the staging of swordfights. This self, performed by a child actor, presented a highly fragile artifice which could only be staged in a way that emphasised its 'triviality.' One can argue therefore that in this space, constructed by a particular performance-practice, the audience was being invited to enter into the fiction that it, in turn, was somehow a part of a similar theatrical equation to that which constituted the court masque. In exchange for the price of entry, they were, like a monarch seated to view a masque, entitled to "make a censure true," to discriminate according to the degree of self-detachment within which they had

constructed themselves in bearing witness to a performed subjectivity.

What was for the court a cultural practice or repeated ceremony became in the indoor theatres at Blackfriars and Paul's a fictive commodity - but in a context where the fluid exchange of commodities was asserting itself as a cultural practice of far-ranging proportions. The deference of the courtly masque performance was one of the commodities on offer, which in itself served to mark a more general shift that was occurring in the city-environment, between a concept of action motivated by conferred status and one constructed within the economy of a contractual agreement. The desire to contain and possess the very agency of representability, with all that that implied, was given far greater scope in the indoor playhouses than in the outdoor ones as, after all, the distance between role and player was so much more noticeable. The children were servants and choristers, rather than 'masterless men,' and their performance of roles with which they had little in common took place within a chain of legitimation which had as its ultimate function the 'flattering' of an audience who were in close proximity within an enclosed venue. Taking on a female role in this context, then, was subtly different to taking on a female role in a public playhouse; a subject to which I will be returning.

Whereas in the outdoor playhouses the female characters could have been easily differentiated from the males by their obvious juniority, within the context of a boy company production the female character was being performed by one boy out of many. What happened on this indoor stage was that the taking on of such a role rehearsed the patriarchal powers of the formation of self and other, whereby forms of fashioned difference - here sexual difference - could
be partitioned within an androcentric order. This containment, having been made manifest by the boy’s performance, could in turn bestow the power of its legitimation upon the spectators who applauded such an event, which was supposedly, after all, presented completely out of deference for them. In flattering the subjectivity of the audience in this way, the actors were offering up their own performances as inauthentic simulations - voiding themselves, if you like - they were also enacting a sense of ‘self’ that was always on the verge of breaking up. In rehearsing a realised, contained form, they were also implying its ready undoing, with the roles that each boy on stage was playing readily interchangeable and exchangeable.

For the brief duration of a performance, it could be believed that the very power to create and to name was something that could be bought and sold. What such a desire exposed, however, was an anxiety that sat deeply in the consciousness of those for whom the desire for status and self was allied to the desire for privacy. Here was a desire whose strategy of withdrawal and internalisation simply offered the opportunity for a more extensive and powerful mode of subjectivity. As the intents and desires of the self became more and more internalised, so the structure of the self could be objectified as something material and problematic. Exemplifying this new problem, Jean-Christophe Agnew cites the growth of so-called ‘rogue literature’ - cony-catching pamphlets and the like - as being not simply a response to city-dwellers’ increasing insecurity about the intents and strategies of such characters, but also as marking an escalation of a far broader problem that they were supposedly designed to contain:

what sort of self was it... that these guidebooks sought to help? If the[sel]... pamphlets are any indication, it was a private self, a self already constituted behind the many public masks it delighted to wear... If, for example, the human self could be
said to exist only as the imagined vessel or vehicle of the
interests its many masks implied, then that existence was
likewise as conjectural as the motives to which those masks
obliquely pointed. 45

Contained and perfected, this notional self was constructed
within a void, it being the only point that remained free from
dissimulation and representation, and yet upon which, via the link of
metonymy, was implicated the shifting draperies of the ‘surface.’
What if, like the void-sweets of the banquet table, this self was also a
sugar-spun concoction? In this regard, it should be noted that while
sugar and spices were at this time seen as substanceless, the void-
foods were nevertheless eagerly sought not only because of the status
that they supposedly carried, but also because of their perceived
restorative, preservative and generally medicinal effects. Cookery
books again and again asserted the restorative effects of marmalade
preserves and distilled void wines, in some cases even offering the
preservation of youth, like a mixable El Dorado. Such a surreal
celebration of the physical body was further underlined in these texts
with the mingling of recipes for sweets with recipes for cosmetics and
perfumes, thus providing a more tangible means of material self-
preservation. This insecurity of self, matched with the
insubstantiality of the banqueting-houses themselves, suggested
therefore, that “[i]t was not just the body but the detached - i.e.,
fragmented and unplaceable - ‘self’ reified by the body that was the
source of anxiety. Renaissance banqueting houses situated a quest in
which an endlessly frustrated search for private subjectivity was
displaced into repetitive, ritualistic acts of preserving the flesh.”46

Part of the anxiety borne from constructing the body as an
impermeable wall is the contained acknowledgement that such a body

45 Agnew, Worlds Apart, p. 73.
46 Fumerton, Cultural Aesthetics, p. 135-6.
owes its entire existence to masking and discriminate blindness. Within this the margins between rival subjectivities are not made more concrete, but less, a diminishment of definition that is all the more alluring for the fiction of definable edges which such a retreating perspective of subjectivity offers. An anxious relation between the respective forms of body and ‘self’, and of public self and private self, emerges, with the retreating trajectory of the self’s quest for privacy and accrued status constructing the body in turn as a discrete model of containment.

Projecting this anxiety onto the body of the boy actor could be seen as tantamount to questioning the authenticity of ‘the body,’ as a visible sign itself. Like the delicate sweets on the banqueting table, one’s eyes are drawn to them, but what is being looked at? The signs, surfaces and pretexts that they present? Or the poetics and performance of such a sign-system, the strategies by which the metonymies of ‘selfhood’ attach themselves to such self-less entities - such as they were at this time - as children? As a means of understanding this, I would suggest that the fragile materiality of the fashioned characters was itself being asserted as a central issue of performance practice; an issue that the boy actors themselves underlined simply by their inauthentic, unqualified presences on stage. Their performances of roles, as the polite prologues of the 1580s suggest, were fragile in the way that their performances risked the derision of their more physically-endowed spectators. Nevertheless, it is an understanding of this very fragility, and how this theatre employed it, that allows us to view this theatre as a performance-context where the mere physical presence of the actors on stage informed not only superficial transgressions of social order - such as across gender or class boundaries - but more importantly the very
indefinition of such limits. It is in this area of theatrical semiotics that this uncertainty, this anxiety lies. Seen on a broader scale, the transgression and construction of boundaries, on a national as well as personal level, was an issue of great sensitivity at this time with, for example, the 1588 victory over the Spanish Armada and the early and tenuous territorial inroads into the strange New World to the west symbolically providing powerful and politically seductive examples of the need to codify and rigidly control both the liminal zones of incursion and dispersal, and the mysterious bodies beyond that which threatened to influence how those limits were to be defined. Or rather, such efforts were based on a political need to disperse and distract from any sense of national indefiniteness that might emerge and conflict with the ideology of ‘England,’ the nation-state as cultural project. Similarly on a personal level, the strategies of ‘self-worth’ - the articulation of the space of the self - were asserting themselves as vital issues, with the theatre itself providing a symbol for this anxiety, an anxiety where notions of ‘inside’, ‘outside’, ‘beyond’ and ‘within’ were all seen to be reliant on assumptions that were becoming increasingly obscure.

Chapman’s Bussy D’Ambois, performed in or around 1604 by the Children of Paul’s, opens with a bare stage, onto which walks “Bussy D’Ambois, poor.” As this scene develops, it becomes increasingly noticeable that the space that the stage is meant to be representing for the duration of that scene is essentially ‘anywhere.’ Its only distinguishing feature is that it is where Bussy is:

MONSIEUR: I followed D’Ambois to this green retreat,  
A man of spirit beyond the reach of fear,  
Who, discontent with his neglected worth,
Neglects the light, and loves obscure abodes. (I.i.45-8) 

In such a universe, conscious space is dictated in a harsh chiaroscuro that effectively marginalises Bussy at this point and, arguably, for the duration of the play. Here he is "beyond", and risks being "unnamed", which in Monsieur's eyes is an unthinkable mis-use of Fortune. Throughout this opening exchange between Bussy and Monsieur, rhetorical contrasts between light and shade, order and chaos, fixity and 'neglect' are being articulated, in a debate that ultimately questions not only Bussy's place on the stage (what has he to say?) but the very 'place' of the stage itself. Whose gaze, or way of seeing, does it serve? Is the stage itself some kind of ideological construct that legislates the imaginative grounds upon which individual figures and actions can be said to be represented - and the assumptions from which 'representation' is derived?

The strength of this play is in the fact that it asks, at a very early stage, 'what is theatre?' Monsieur's invitation to Bussy to join him at court, at the source of light, involves a curiously sudden shift in metaphor, that he should "[l]eave the troubled streams,/ And live, as thrivers do at the well-head."(I.i.83-4) At the well-head surely is to be found the clearest water, which then descends and disperses into the valley, gathering debris and passing over frothing rapids as it goes. As the water spreads, its original purity and form may in some way change, but the ideal, the 'water-ness' remains clearly recognisable. What, then, as Bussy asks, if the source, the point of authenticity and privilege, is itself askew, a poison that freeze-dries as it quenches? Or even a mask that smothers? For him, following Monsieur's cue, this 'source' is the court, though it could just as well be the theatre, that

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'other court’, and especially the salubrious and enclosed surroundings of the indoor theatre:

**BUSSY:**

Alas, what should I do  
With that enchanted glass? See devils there?  
Or, like a strumpet, learn to set my looks  
In an eternal brake, or practise juggling,  
To keep my face still fast, my heart still loose;  
Or bear, like dame-school mistresses their riddles,  
Two tongues, and be good only for a shift;  
Flatter great lords, to put them in mind  
Why they were made lords; ...  

..............................  

... spend a man's life  
In sights and visitations that will make  
His eyes as hollow as his mistress' heart...

(I.i.84-92,94-6)

In this explanation, Bussy demonstrates how such a ‘natural’ image as a well-head can refer to a whole network of forms, and that the well-head itself implies nothing less than formation or production. An enchanted mirror, which in objectifying form in two dimensions, constructs the ‘self’ as something automatically marginal and split off in the way that it supposedly forms the mysterious “loose” foundation for the transactions that take place at the surface. Materialised in this way, Monsieur’s “well-head,” the immaculate source of light that “[n]ot only serves to show, but render us/ Mutually profitable” (I.i.77-8), is picked up and shown to occupy and dictate a discrete space of its own, with an inside and an outside. It is this strange space that Bussy chooses to enter at the conclusion of this scene. Monsieur’s invitation into this arena is supposedly ‘a gift of Fortune,’ yet part of the effect of this ‘arena’ is, it would seem, to swallow ‘Fortune’ itself, to construct it into a particular kind of discourse that expects - that cues - a specific, rehearsable response.

**MONSIEUR:** Be ruled by me then. The rude Scythians  
Painted blind Fortune's powerful hands with wings  
To show her gifts come swift and suddenly,  
Which if her favourite be not swift to take,  
He loses them for ever.  

(I.i.113-17)
In this way, Monsieur appropriates 'Fortune' as a figure or sign to rouse Bussy, so as to employ him, as "[t]is fit I get resolved spirits about me," since "[t]here's but a thread betwixt me and a crown;/ I would not wish it cut, unless by nature..." (I.i.44,41-2). Like a castle in the air, Fortune's protection can suddenly de-materialise from around a discarded favourite, leaving him to be "cast headlong from the sky" (I.i.143) - and the sun. The paradoxical link between blind Fortune's court and the temporal court, a link which both Monsieur and Bussy refer to, can itself be seen as signifier of the way in which the desire-to-contain, "[t]o put a girdle round about the world" (I.i.23), that 'the court' is supposedly both expression and instrument of, is itself a uniforming construct. This 'court' may pride itself on the way in which it can be constructed along Ptolemaic lines of gathered containment and ordained precedent, but this is a fragile mask for the bitter factional rivalry that underpins the falls and rises of one's 'fortune', as well as providing the motivation for Monsieur's entreaties to Bussy in the first place. In this specifically material world, where even "Honour" can be picked up, turned over and seen "on his head" (I.i.2), Bussy is himself in grave danger of being scarcely visible, though his conscious 'outsider's apprehension' in itself offers no means of escape: indeed, Monsieur considers it as a springboard, a threshold - "thou need'st not learn,/ Thou hast the theory, now go there and practise." (I.i.104-5)

The passage across this threshold into the court is a journey that in different ways both Bussy and, to a degree, the stage, take part in; both he and it are marked for the rest of the play by taking on the ambivalence of liminality. Bussy has inscribed upon him various identities throughout the play: poor soldier, courtier, "Fortune's proud mushroom shot up in a night" (III.i.98), adversary "fierce... [a]s
Hector" (II.i.35,54). To the king, Bussy performs the double role of objectified protector and plaything as "my brave eagle" (IV.i.108). Once he has entered the 'flow' of the court-world, Bussy is constantly being evaluated and re-evaluated by those figures into whose field of vision he enters: worth is conferred upon him, but like any marketable commodity this 'worth' is constantly under negotiation, as the other courtiers attempt to find means of representing him as a 'containable object' to supplement their own subjectivity. This is most clearly seen at the end of the opening scene, as Maffé enters and approaches Bussy in order to pay him the thousand crowns that Monsieur has ordered him to. On seeing Bussy, however, Maffé severely doubts the wisdom of this investment:

MAFFÉ: Humour of princes! Is this man indued
With any merit worth a thousand crowns?
Will my lord have me be so ill a steward
Of his revenue, to dispose a sum
So great with so small cause as shows in him? (I.i.144-48)

For Maffé, the very sight of Bussy suggests the uncontained, anarchic chaos that the self-fashioning strategies of both court and courtiers are constructed to exclude; he is like a mouth, or conduit, an empty void into which wealth could simply be drained:

MAFFÉ: I see the man; a hundred crowns will make him
Swagger, and drink healths to his Highness' bounty,
And swear he could not be more bountiful.
So there's nine hundred crowns, saved. (I.i.179-82)

In this context, the economy of monetary exchange which Maffé is employing can be seen as a kind of wall, as his quite blunt attempt at shutting Bussy out of Monsieur's pocket, and so the network of patronage that it signifies, demonstrates. Once Bussy has entered the court, and achieved that apex of the courtly world in becoming the king's favourite, this 'threat' of unpredictability is displaced further onto a cosmic level, in the fear that in Bussy here is a subject that
"wouldst envy, betray,/ Slander, blaspheme, change each hour a religion,/ Do anything..."(III.i.356-58). Anything, that is, except the unimaginable and self-negating act of killing the king himself. To kill the king would effectively nullify Bussy’s own self, as his identity within the court is by now generated entirely through the relationship that being a favourite implies. Thus, Bussy, in attracting the alternating attention and fear of the court in this way, not only performs the function of the threshold personified, but furthermore enlarges upon this ‘function’ and unwittingly demonstrates through the trajectory that he negotiates the extent and range of liminal anxiety that exists within this ideological structure. The more that Bussy is observed to overstep his ‘mark,’ so the efforts to contain his excess and enlarge the mystical walls of the court thicken ever further.

As the narrative escalates in this manner, so the ‘Bussys’ that are constructed for him operate as means by which the king and courtiers sketch out Bussy’s autonomy, so that he may thus be rationalised as an allowed effect of “policy”, rather than its treacherous edge. The court, and the whole ‘order of seeing’ that it entails is here something hard, even brittle, with its edges firmly enforced. Taking up again the link suggested above between this theatre and the model of the liminoid phenomenon, by which communal experience is self-consciously re-invented as something partial or marginal, this situation translates itself at the next remove as being the cultural product of a highly self-conscious theatricality, a theatricality which takes conventions and casts them into high relief. Another way of looking at it is to say that in rehearsing this whole hegemonic culture, there is very much a sense of what Steven Mullaney calls a
“dramaturgical process of estrangement through familiarity”, the familiar elements of hierarchy being staged in such a way as to be subject to speculation.

Bussy’s death in the final scene is not only the undoing of Bussy but also, in a sense, the ‘un-doing’ of the play as well, as the split between what ‘happens’ and how it is seen is taken to its most cutting limit. Bussy, the dashing stirrer, has been shot in the back whilst fending off a pathologically jealous husband, and yet dies within the swelling rhetoric of classical heroism. He desperately imagines dying upright, so that “[h]ere like a Roman statue I will stand/ Till death hath made me marble. Oh, my fame,/ Live in despite of murther!” (V.iii.144-6) Bussy emerges in this final scene as a construct, and a construct around which the whole play has been built. He is a product of sight, of ‘seen surfaces’, and his dying speeches play out a debate on how he could be seen: the challenge of “[i]s my body then/ But penetrable flesh?” (V.iii.125-6) is met with the thesis that “[m]an is of two sweet courtly friends compact,/ A mistress and a servant: let my death/ Define life nothing but a courtier’s breath.” (V.iii.130-33) Ultimately, however, this self, constructed out of idealistic desire like a house of cards, must dissipate into a bleeding, mortal mess. The closure is swift, unheroic and clumsy, and though it may serve as a demonstration of the power of Fate, the shifts in focus that take place in this scene, and indeed in the whole play, make such a singular defining point difficult to maintain. Bussy dies refusing to bestow any glory from his death onto Fate, turning instead to the only source of light for him, Tamyra, and her suffering - “[m]y

sun is turned to blood” (V.iii.182) - and meditates upon the fragility of his self:

BUSSY: Oh, frail condition of strength, valour, virtue,
      In me, like warning fire upon the top
      Of some steep beacon, on a steeper hill,
      Made to express it: like a falling star
      Silently glanced, that like a thunderbolt
      Looked to have stuck and shook the firmament. (V.iii.188-94)

The enduring sense of this final image is one of a life all but completely shed of any meaning. Bussy, despairing of fame, finally recognises his self-misconception by identifying with the oblivion of insignificance that he so despises. Both his life, and by extension the play - and its performance - of which it has formed the uncertain basis, have been exposed as merely empty and diverting, with his self a confusing and insufficient failure. Do these “brave relicts of a complete man” (V.iii.268) simply refer to a need to ‘see’ impregnibility, and is the implication that heroism alone could, in these fragile, plague-ridden times, offer diverting pleasure enough? Within the liminal boundaries that this play etches out, the friction between ‘court’ and ‘non-court,’ operate on the stage within the same palimpsestic model - of ‘hero’ being played by ‘non-hero’ - that makes this final scene so troublesome. The over-writing not only manifests itself in the new suit of clothes that Bussy sports on his entrance to the court, but in the more fundamental dramaturgical manner in which the character that each player performs is constructed not so much through writing on as writing over the body of the child actor. In this way, the tension set up by liminality and the transgressive perils of representation extends from the cleared and open surface of the stage onto that site, the very body of the actor himself, to which I will be devoting the next chapter.
The confines of the City

Not only Bussy, but also his performance, therefore, is consciously reliant upon the legitimating presence of the audience, who by this same economy of formation could also be seen to be constructing them-selves as a uniform body, in a space supposedly separated from the demands and formative structures of the city. The figure of Bussy points up an uncomfortable dilemma that has been shown to be of much importance in understanding the social context from which the theatre’s audience emerged: what Don Wayne calls “the dilemma of attempting to distinguish between independence and fragmentation, between freedom and license.” 49 Bussy’s “independence” could only be demonstrated in a subjective ‘separateness’ which resulted in his eventual downfall. The fragile contract that contained the audience within its allocated section of the theatre was in some senses as delicate as the walls that protected the banqueting-houses of the rich from the outside elements. For all the fictional claims of status that it bestowed, this contract was a product of compromise and negotiation, terms of social action themselves produced in the tension between doctrinal, status-based obligation and the self-interest of voluntary contractual obligation. 50

The most demonstrative artifact of these tensions and ambivalences was the city of London itself, which as a space was as much ideological as it was physical or topographical. Approaching this early modern city in this way it becomes as much a ‘body’ as any of the individuals or institutions within it, with its own boundaries

50 ibid., p. 104.
and strategies of formation: to use Steven Mullaney’s words, we can see it as “a social text composed by varied rites of initiation, celebration, and exclusion - by a diverse body of ritual practices... through which a ceremonial social order could maintain and manifest itself, in time and in space.”51 The ‘city’ was not only a place but also a principle; a site of “conspicuous consumption”52 that in a sense represented and re-defined notions of consumption and exchange for England as a whole, being a unique and ever-growing metropolis in the midst of a still highly-ruralised country.

An important adjunct to the boundary-forming celebrations of ‘the city’ was the part played by the outdoor playhouses themselves, as they sprang up not simply at the edges of the city but at the very edges of the Liberties, a region vital in understanding how the city saw itself. The ceremonies and rituals of the premodern city served to define, sanctify and interpret the many-textured space that the urban community occupied. These rituals, it has been argued, built up within them a “play of interpretative difficulty” which served ultimately to distinguish citizen from non-citizen - those who can play from those who can’t.53 This definition of community was, however, coming under increasing strain during the Elizabethan period in the face of economic, cultural and social changes, as the city became increasingly unrecognisable even to its own citizens. Seeing this development in terms of the nation, John Lyly wrote in 1589 that “[t]raffic and travel hath woven the nature of all nations into ours,

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51 Mullaney, The Place of the Stage, pp. vii-viii.
and made this land into an arras, full of devise..." The dramaturgical process of ritualised inscription, interpretation and renewal which had at its heart the concrete realisation of the specific body politic of the city, was being increasingly displaced by a dramaturgy of dissembling, part of a network of transactions that took place in secret places. People came into the city from the country in increasing numbers to take advantage of, and effectively enlarge upon, the newfound anonymity that the city offered. Nowhere was the resulting insecurity more acutely exercised and felt, and the desire - by the civic authorities - to regulate more noticeable than at the Liberties at the outskirts of London, which were traditionally operated as a zone of transition between the city and the countryside. These were liminal spaces: at outposts here, on the roads leading into the city, travellers were examined for leprosy or plague; going in the opposite direction, new laws were first proclaimed here before being disseminated throughout the country. Authority was expressed here, and indeed its very existence was an expression of power, but the ambiguity and equivocation that this point of constant passage was associated with made it - paradoxically - almost ungovernable. Constructed out of the city-authorities' desire for a consciously generated and regulated urbanity, these spaces were both inscribed within and yet untouchable by the structure that through them tried to define itself. It was in these spaces, to return to the vocabulary of the banqueting-house, that the city confronted itself as a void, or a point of tension. Ultimately all of the Liberties were incorporated within the jurisdiction of the city in 1609, but by this time the most controversial product of this zone, the theatre, had gained for itself a permanent place in the

54 ibid., p. 19.
culture of the city, and the protection of royal patronage. In any case, the liminal function had by now been already incorporated within the propertied, urbanised self in terms of its quest for a private, self-confirming subjectivity, which located its greatest tension in the void of self encountered in the passage from public to private selfhood.

By the end of the 16th century, the Liberties of Elizabethan London had become a heterogeneous zone of retreat away from the functional life of the city, a hotch-potch of “gaming houses, taverns, bear-baiting arenas, marketplaces... brothels,... [along with] monasteries, lazar-houses, and scaffolds of execution”55 - and now theatres. Within the context of my thesis, the Liberties that are of most interest are those that existed actually within the walls of the city. To quote Mullaney once more:

Liberties existed within the city walls as well, but they too stood outside of London’s effective domain; like the Liberties outside the walls, they were a part of the city yet juridically set apart from it. Entering a Liberty, whatever its location, meant crossing over into an ambiguous territory that was at once internal and external to the city, neither contained by civic authority nor fully removed from it.56

These ‘internal Liberties’ were places of retreat and ambivalent sanctuary also, being or having been the property of the Church, and two of these sites, Blackfriars Priory and the Cathedral Close, were by the end of the 1570s sporting theatres also. It would seem that the process of internalised retreat that was charted in the architecture of the country-house and royal palace, a retreat which had found a culminating point in the construction of the banqueting-house, was echoed within the auditoria of these new venues.

The act of ‘seeing’ at such a site as a theatre had become, by the beginning of the 17th century, a performed act of self-fashioning in

55 ibid., p. 22.
56 ibid., p. 21.
regard to social standing. As a retreat into idleness, it was constructed not as the sinful resort for idle living that the anti-theatrical pamphleteers so railed against, but rather as part of a general movement amongst the affluent, propertied classes towards seeing leisure activities as being active statements in themselves about wealth and status. Going to the theatre, along with resorting in taverns, parks and gardens, was thus not simply a diversion from daily business but an active, even dramaturgical, declaration of status and social power. When these people went to the theatre, then, what they saw increasingly reflected the social dramaturgy which they themselves were reliant upon, and nowhere was this more evident than on the boy company stages at Blackfriars and Pauls from about 1603/4, with the emergence and commercial success of the new city comedies, a kind of play which has been associated with the articulation of new attitudes to the urban environment, and the emergence of a distinctly urban consciousness.57

The ‘secret places’ that the theatre at large was seen to offer, both literally as a potential site for anonymous and untraceable transactions amongst the members of the crowd, and symbolically in terms of it offering spectacles containing “nothing but unchaste fables, lascivious devises and shifts of cozenage”,58 arguably demonstrated its carnivalesque liminality to its detractors. The theatre was here operating as a ‘rehearsal’ for the city, a rehearsal that constructed the city as “an urban space which, drawing a crowd of strangers to it, affords occasion for the concealment of private transactions”.59 The theatre, then, emerged as a space where deception and mystification

were legitimate, distinct objects for representation. The speculative 'intrigue,' by which I mean the concealed pursuit of long-term prosperity, became more and more a central motivation around which the narrative turned, rather than being an incidental aspect associated with the 'witty trickster,' and it is a feature of the later Caroline and Restoration comedies, which had derived much in turn from some of the Jacobean city comedies. Massinger's *The City-Madam* (1632), for example, can be seen as a fashionable re-working of Chapman, Jonson & Marston's *Eastward Ho!* (c1605), whilst Congreve's *The Way of the World* (1700) used Jonson's *Epicoene* as a model.

What I am trying to outline here is not the setting of any pattern of 'influence,' but rather the emerging efficacy of a particular mode of theatricality that effected a re-visioning or re-presentation of the space of an urban environment that was itself undergoing immense change. In *Epicoene*, the setting is quite specifically "London," complete with references not only to physical features such as the newly sculpted archways at Aldgate but also to such spatial features of the subjective 'urban mind' as the incessant ringing of plague-bells, or the carriage-traffic of the ladies to "the china-houses or the Exchange"(I.iii.35), sites where leisure and commercialisation went hand in hand. Every lodging or site in this play is a potential or real point of retreat from the press of the city, sites which in turn articulated the means by which privilege and status were constructed through the desire for a commodifiable privacy:

It is... from out of the fashionable, socially poised privacy of Clerimont's upstairs town apartment that the attack is going to be launched on the unfashionable, anti-social privacy of Morose's house. And crucial to Clerimont's lodging is a sense,
wholly implicit, of its being a stoutly defended citadel, from which forays can be made of a patronizingly dismissive nature.60

In such a reading, the walls that partition the city operate not as external, visible barriers, but instead as something internal and intangible, relating to ideas of pleasure - and along with it, subjectivity - on the defensive. The mock walls and turrets of the stately banqueting-house were being replicated by a dramaturgy of style and self-distancing that constructed every one-on-one contact, even those that did not involve a financial transaction, as an estranging threshold experience. As has been demonstrated in the study of John Bulwer’s discovery of gesture, motion and ‘physical rhetoric’ in Chirologia (1644), Chironomia (1644), Pathomyotomia (1649) and Anthropometamorphosis (1653), the body itself was being conceived as a material drapery all of its own, locating an even newer site of withdrawal and potential intrigue.61

The possibilities for transgression in such an environment similarly multiplied and, like the body that perpetrated such actions, were both more and less mystical, reflecting on the shift in the way one ‘looked.’ Transgression was more mysterious in the sense that the boundaries, and therefore their crossing, were more internalised; and less in the sense that the ever-expanding process of commodification had effectively materialised every social action as an object for appraisal in an economy of theatricality, where the ‘self’ was potentially as much a stranger as any other player. As commodities, the boy actors had little to offer in the way of theatrical fireworks, but the theatricality of the city comedies alone is perhaps indicative that the “liminoid commodity” that their performances embodied

61 Agnew, Worlds Apart, pp. 86ff.
extended into an exploration not only of the ‘urban space’ but also the way in which such a space could be performed - and performed in - as well as what was performing there.

In Beaumont’s *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* (c1607), the theatre itself, the stage, and the spectators watching, even the play being performed, all assert themselves as distinct and distanced material items. The unspoken links which separate each effect of the theatrical event are here demystified in an extravaganza of transgressive theatricality. The apparent liberty that this text discovers, however, can only be constructed through painful, jarring transitions. The distance that is set between most of the spectators and the stage is made into a piece of stage-business when the citizen lifts his wife onto the stage, followed by his apprentice, Rafe, and they seat themselves amongst the gallants at the side of the Blackfriars stage: “Rafe, help your mistress this way. - Pray, gentlemen, make her a little room. - I pray you, sir, lend me your hand to help up my wife; I thank you, sir...” (ind.,46-8).  

The friction caused by having a merchant and his wife supposedly transgress this conventional zone of gallants-only self-display is itself set on its head by the fact that these are actors, indeed child actors, playing adults amongst privileged examples of the real thing, who in turn had paid the price of a ticket to be entertained by these actors. The problem of where and how to look at ‘the stage’ is made even more problematical by the form of the play itself, which is in effect two plays being performed both side by side and amidst each other - “The London Merchant” and Rafe’s improvised “The Knight of the Burning Pestle.” Both plays inhabit respective versions of the

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city of London which threaten to dissolve each other - which indeed has already happened - as the interruptions of the citizen, and particularly his wife, continually question both the form and content of "The London Merchant" as they wait for their beloved Rafe to reappear upon the stage. Defending "The London Merchant," the boy who is sent out to quieten them explains "[s]ir, you must pardon us; the plot of our play lies contrary, and 'twill hazard the spoiling of our play."(II.ii.264-5) The cartography of "The London Merchant" charts a London that is beset by unspoken intrigue and desire, in which relations between the sexes are characterised by deceit, possession and exchange, in which Venturewell’s daughter Luce is a prime commodity. This London collides with the London of valiant Rafe and his friends, which is a vast undifferentiated plain of chivalry, replete with damsels in distress. As Rafe explains, “in this desert there must needs be placed/ Many strong castles held by courteous knights”(II.ii.337-8). Every sight becomes mystified and fantastic: the Bell Inn becomes the castle of the knight of the holy order of the Bell; a barber’s shop becomes a giant’s den from which bravely imprisoned knights must be freed.

In this celebration of liminality which encompasses all aspects of both text and performance, there is nothing that cannot be represented. As Rafe’s ‘audition’ at the beginning of the play, along with his speech-opportunities during the course of it, suggests, ‘acting’ itself can be imitated. Eastward Ho! (c1605; Blackfriars) also presents the city as something quite plastic in its form, though which in this case is fashioned and finished, objectifiable. The direction of the play’s title refers literally to the compass-direction that the Thames river dictates to ships leaving London, even if their intended destination is, as in the case of Seagull and Sir Petronel Flash,
Virginia. In this play London, like a vast inescapable mouth, breeds commodities and the desire for them, objectifying titles, bodies, parcels of land and far-distant continents along a single continuum of speculative value. The excess that characterises this play, visible in Flash’s insatiable desire for self-inflation, Gertrude’s apparent sexual excess, or even the ability of money to speak (“[t]here spake an angel…” (II.ii.234))⁶³ can be seen to construct that conspicuous consumption with which London was associated, as its sole, representable trait. Indeed, the stage even exhibits its own excess, as Quicksilver’s drunkenness demonstrates when he opens his mouth in II.i and delivers quotations from other plays practically non-stop, like an actor filled to the brim with lines.

The conclusion of the play shows the pranksters remorseful and ‘the city,’ as represented in the solid figure and voice of Touchstone, victorious, merciful, and above the legitimating strictures of authority. This carnivalesque event is completed with Quicksilver’s direct suggestion to the audience that this “pageant” attract them all once a week - which was the frequency of shows at Blackfriars - just as that other great civic celebration, the Lord Mayor’s show, drew them together once a year. One could suggest that this play posits the notion that the generosity of the city corrects the excessive liquidity of the court, but this play caused a great censorship scandal with its alleged slights at the Scottish monarch, as well as its implied presentation of dissolving authority. Plays like this gave the boy companies their notoriety in the city and while the Blackfriars children survived this reputation only to sink due to bankruptcy, the Children of Paul’s fared far less well.

The reception of one of the last plays performed by the Children of Paul's, *The Puritan, or the Widow of Watling Street* (1606), exposed that company to the fact that it was itself occupying a highly tenuous point in the urban network. *The Puritan* is set in, and refers directly to, the local neighbourhood of the Cathedral, which had become notoriously 'puritan' in its leanings, and outrageously caricatures these puritans who inhabit it as drunkards, liars and hypocrites. A particular target of attack was the parish of St Antlin's, situated at the junction of the main thoroughfare of Watling street and the street that led out of St Austin's Gate from the Cathedral Close, barely two minutes walk from the Cathedral. It was a familiar local landmark, and had in fact been originally gifted by the Dean and Chapter of St Paul's. In the play, the character identified as the priest-in-charge of St Antlin's is variously addressed as "Master Full-belly" or "Pigman," a figure who hates actors and rails against them vehemently "because they brought him drunk upon the stage once...". The church is itself personified in the character Nicolas St-Antlings, who with his friends, Frailty and Simon St-Maryoveries, stage a scene where they devise a means of evading the ten commandments, and together with their minister they later manage to have their old master, Sir Godfrey, gulled by a rogue, an action they ensure by blocking up their door with "zealous works," mocking those who believed that such works could literally shut out the devil.

In satirising the Manicheistic excesses of the puritan pamphleteers, the Paul's Children here effectively over-reached themselves by, it would seem, unwittingly alienating themselves from the very institution that had allowed them to flourish. On St

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64 Gair, *Children of Paul's*, p. 165. As far as I know, this play - possibly by Thomas Middleton - is not available except in facsimile form.
Valentine’s Day 1607/8 a Puritan divine, William Crashawe, delivered a sermon at the other public gathering place in the Cathedral grounds, Paul’s Cross. It was anti-theatrical in content, and rehearsed many of the familiar complaints against the theatre, but in this instance included a specific and unambiguous attack on the Children of Paul’s, with particular reference to the performance, and subsequent publication, of The Puritan:

...they be children of Babylon that will not be healed: nay, they grow worse and worse, for now they bring religion and holy things upon the stage... Two hypocrites must be brought forth; and how shall they be described but by these names, Nicolas S. Antlings, Simon S. Maryoveries?\(^{65}\)

This objectionable mixture of sacred and secular is brought out even further when Crashawe goes on to attack the timing of the play performances, which apparently took place on Sundays, as he refers to “their continual prophaning of the sabbath, which generally in the country is their play day, and oftentimes God’s divine service hindered, or cut shorter to make room and give time to the devil’s service.”\(^{66}\)

‘Mixture,’ which in most anti-theatrical pamphlets was denoted by the pejorative term ‘whoredom,’ was a state of being which Puritan feeling connected with all the ills of the world, be they idleness, excess, women, filth, the plague or even feeling itself. It denoted the destructive chaos that many thought was threatening to engulf them, and so it was to be avoided at all costs: “[t]hose who wished to ‘purify’ themselves from the jumble of fears and desires natural to a time of rapid change needed a form offering more secure defenses, less flexible management of feeling.”\(^{67}\) The theatre, and especially this

\(^{65}\) *ibid.*, p. 164.

\(^{66}\) *ibid.*, p. 166.

theatre, embodied this 'whoredom' and thus could even be implicated in such calamities as the regular visitations of the plague. Paul's playhouse competed directly with the pulpit, and from Crashawe's pulpit this theatre was its literal opposite, its underside, a 'point of seeing' that threatened, to his way of thinking, to obscure and thwart that self which could be revealed through the light of divine instruction.

In the unconscious competition with the pulpit for the same 'space' in the imagination of the city's populace, this theatre had apparently undone itself. Still positing itself as a retreat, it nevertheless acknowledged that it was now attracting the kind of attention that political meetings or other potentially treacherous gatherings did. Another late play of the Paul's Children, Beaumont & Fletcher's *The Woman Hater* (1607), begins with an apologetical prologue addressed to specifically identifiable members of the audience, spies ready to report any indiscretion:

> if there be any lurking amongst you in corners, with table-books, who have some hope to find matter to feed his malice on, let them clasp them up, and slink away, or stay and be converted. For he that made this play means to please auditors so as he may be an auditor himself hereafter, and not purchase them with the dear loss of his ears.68

Such an eventuality was certainly not unknown to the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre, including the theatre of the boy companies, but this is possibly the only time it was actually referred to from the stage. From this point, not only can we say that the theatre occupied space, both literally and metaphysically, and that it took part of its signification from the zone that contained it, but also that it too contained. The theatre, as a discrete space or domain, was now a realm unto itself, but one that was nevertheless readily violable.

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68 Gair, *Children of Paul's*, p. 167.
The Theatre and the Body: Discovery and Illusion

...beholde the sumptuous Theatre houses, a continuall monument of Londons prodigalitie and folly...

(Thomas White, A Sermon preached at Pawles Crosse...[1578])

MOROSE: Is that Gorgon, that Medusa, come? Hide me! Hide me!

TRUEWIT: I warrant you, sir, she will not transform you. Look upon her with good courage -

(Jonson, Epicoene [1609], III.vii.21-25)
Skimming the Surface

John Day’s The Isle of Gulls, performed at Blackfriars in early 1606, opens with an induction which depicts three “gentlemen” who enter “as to see a play” (namely, The Isle of Gulls) and who ‘hold up’ the start of the play by engaging the actor who is to deliver the prologue in a discussion on the nature of the play they are about to see, and on theatre in general. The scene itself quickly becomes an ‘assertion’ of the audience’s power: each gentleman has his own opinion on what makes for a good play and they threaten to disrupt the performance if their respective tastes are not respected.

1. GENT.: Looke toot, if there be not gall int, it shall not passe.
2. GENT.: If it be not baudie, tis impossible to passe.
3. GENT.: If it be both Criticall and baudy, if it be not high written, both your Poet, and the house to, loose a friend of me. (ind.,93-98)¹

Sending up or depicting the spectators in this way blurs the edges of both the stage and the play. When is the ‘play’ to begin and the ‘charade’ end? At this point, the stage seems to house all-but-contained anarchy, a perpetual display of strangeness without recognisable form. Indeed, the play that follows ultimately admits no authority in the mounting free-for-all gulling contest that ensues. But the Prologue does, citing the author, the one player nowhere to be seen. As he concludes, “Yet this our Author bad me boldly speake,/
His play shall passe, let Envy swell and breake,/
Detraction he scornes, honours the best...”(ind.,148-50) The actor, bidden by this author to speak these words as preface to his play, already-written, has been directed to deliver his lines “boldly.” Are actors mere vessels then, props or playthings, possessed like demons with some extra-worldly

existence? The induction marks a threshold into the play; it is the audience's 'way in,' and yet it is as much about thresholds - and margins, too. The blurred edge of authority implied in the allusion to authorship overlaps with ideas of the edge of the play-as-performance itself. As in Burning Pestle, 'audience member' becomes a performable act, a theatrical event that no matter how commonplace and 'unperformable' it may seem, takes on for a brief time as gargantuan and extraordinary a life as any fictional or functional character on stage. This is achieved not only because of what is scripted but also quite clearly because these figures are subjected to the same performance practice: they are played by children, whose bodies and high voices normally were reserved for the performing of female characters on the outdoor stages. The commonplace and unremarkable suddenly becomes a representation of extraordinary dimensions, depicting city theatre-goers at home upon the same strange stage as the bizarre inhabitants of Arcadia and Lacademon who people the Isle of Gulls.

In this play, two Lacademonians, Lisander and Demetrius, visit an island, where Basilius, the Duke of Arcadia, has set up his court in "private retirement heere in this desart Ile..."(I.i.3-4). They disguise themselves respectively as Zelmane, an Amazon, and Dorus, a woodman, in an effort to woo Violetta and Hippolita, daughters of Basilius. The obstructions that they encounter are Dametas, Basilius' unfriendly and unpopular counsellor, and the rival lovers Julio and Aminter. In the merry dance that follows, tricks and gullings abound, with Lisander-as-Zelmane being wooed by both Basilius and his wife Gynetia simultaneously, with each thinking that the other is being fooled. Lisander, playing two gender roles at once, does not so much slip from one role to another, as remain within a continuous state of
shape-shifting, as this exchange - which Basilius has set up - exemplifies, with Lisander supposedly playing a woman playing a man, who is being entreated to play, or re-play, a woman:

GYNETIA: Give me thy hand then, with this amorous kisse
I seale thee mine.

LISANDER: And I confirmt with this.

BASILIUS: [looking on] Rare, rare, rare, she's his seald and deliverd in the presence of her husband.

GYNETIA: Now least my husband should suspect our love--

BASILIUS: (Now, what shadow for that now.)

GYNETIA: Heare a good jest, perswade him th'art a woman.

LISANDER: That's not to doe now madam, for he as confidently believes and ardently courts me for a woman, as you a man.

GYNETIA: Good, excellent, maintaine that humor still,
Seeme coy, looke nice, as we weomen use,
Be mild and proud, imbrace, and yet refuse.

(III.i.146-158, stage direction mine)

The liminality with which the play opens, then, is maintained as the abiding condition for its duration. Like all liminal structures, its "difference" and ambiguity is heavily reliant upon, and enhances, the normative structures that it unties, setting the strangeness of playing in opposition to the normality of 'being'. Yet out of the ambivalence that is found in such a character as Lisander, there is a sense too that the play is also a highly self-conscious depiction of liminality as well, bringing it closer to that re-invention of the liminal, which Victor Turner termed "liminoid". Reporting on what is going on back on the mainland of Arcadia, Aminter, in the guise of a Lacademonian traveller, says to Basilius that "[i]ndeede since your Majestie left the Land, the whole bodie of the Common-wealth runnes cleane against the byas of true and pristine government."(III.iii.107-9) The image of the "bias" comes from the way in which a bowling ball was designed,
with the weight placed off-centre so that when bowled the ball would swerve as it rolls across the pitch, rather than travel in a straight line. Government in Arcadia, then, is a normative structure implanted off-centre within the Commonwealth, so that it swings "true". The dichotomy between carnival and normative is itself bent here, as it is being cited by a character in disguise who hopes to gain from what he is saying - which indeed he does, with the share of a reward of 200 crowns. Rather than the normative feeding off the energy of the liminal, with the gulling of the Duke quite the opposite is happening. The normative becomes a joke, an object of parody even as it is being evoked.

Studying the play of role and self that constitutes the action of representation on the stage brings into question the social role of the actor him- or herself. The actor's very presence legitimizes a movement from one role or identity to another. He or she stands for, or stands in the place of, another; insofar as the role of 'actor' in a cultural context is concerned, this equation is conflated: to be an actor is to embody, in some way, 'otherness' or strangeness. The actor occupied a liminal role in regard to early modern English culture's sense of itself, both literally and metaphorically, with the location of theatre within London's liminal zones, and more significantly with the presence of the actor denoting what Turner calls the culture's "subjunctive" mood. Enacting the verbal mood of possibility and supposition, the actor performs the desire contained within "if I were you...", displacing human action to one remove. This crossing of states becomes particularly self-conscious, however, when invested upon the body of a child. The child is, by definition, pre-social,

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awaiting the passage into adulthood and social visibility. Placing this early modern child upon the stage, therefore, is itself a highly liminoid act, displacing the central structure of human aging and its relation to social structures in general. Lisander’s joke with Basilius, that Gynetia could “take me for a man” (III.i.171) becomes, in the context of a performance, a subversive moment. Lisander is being played by an adolescent male child, what we call a teenager, a boy in the last years of his minority. Virtually fully-grown, yet retaining those physical signifiers of boyhood, a beardless face and a high voice, his physique is itself that of a liminarie, in transition, a neophyte whose very dynamism differentiates him from the static nature of the ‘grownups’ who have paid to watch him. In this light, he functions as a liminoid commodity, setting the tone for the liminoid event in action, as a physical form which simultaneously affiliates itself to more than one social structure whilst being marginal to all. The sheer ambivalence with which this character operates, furthermore, points towards a searching critique of the generation of social identity in early modern culture, and in turn the place of theatrical representation.

To take the body of the child actor literally as a ‘tool,’ however, one should start with an account of the body and the life of the child. For many reasons this is a difficult path to trace. Children are virtually non-existent in accounts or records dating from this time; were it not for the occasional family portrait, or such literary allusions as are found in the opening scene of Shakespeare’s The Winter’s Tale, one might well imagine that the children of early modern England

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were neither seen nor heard. Our understanding of childhood is very much dependent upon the way in which it was conceived within popular culture from the 19th century on. Paintings from the early modern period, however, typically depict children as being simply smaller-scale versions of their parents, 'adults-to-be,' a representation worlds away from the quaint idealism of a Victorian childhood.4 Once old enough to look after themselves, children were enlisted to help with the economic well-being of the family, with girls assisting their mother and older sisters in the vast array of household activities, and boys serving as apprentices. Formal education was an option only for the wealthy or for those lucky exceptions, like the young Ben Jonson, who were able to obtain a scholarship or other funding.

Childhood was a matter of life and death: not only was the child mortality rate high, but parental attitudes were apparently distinguished by physical and psychological denial, making the child a site of almost universal abjection: to quote a proverb known at this time, "who sees a child sees nothing."5 This background was also that of those boys who acted on the stages of Blackfriars or Paul’s, only their lives were even more 'managed,' having been in most cases rural children pressed (even kidnapped) into service at either the Chapel Royal or the Cathedral on the strength of their promising singing voices, as choristers and potential musicians.6 One constant

4 "It is interesting to note that in the frontispiece to the Tabula Ceretis [the 17th century engraver] Merian has placed the little children in a sort of marginal zone, between the earth from which they emerged and the life into which they have not yet entered, and from which they are separated by a portico bearing the inscription Introitus ad vitam." Ariès, P. Centuries of Childhood. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973) p. 37.
6 In 1601 Henry Clifton alleged in the Star Chamber that Nathaniel Giles (then master of the choristers in the Chapel Royal) had abused his warranted powers of
feature of the upbringing of almost every child was the instilling of discipline through work. Idleness and leisure were seen as the activities of the devil, and as such were codified into the genres of liminoid festivity, the carnival and the theatre, moments of escape and subversion which time 'made way' for. Tied inexorably to the passage of time, children's lives, and particularly these children's, were essentially in the control of others, and they possessed no voice of their own in law, and little else besides.

To interpret the ambiguous position of children, and particularly of male adolescents - being voiceless yet expected to be able-bodied - requires an imaginative act, in the absence of any real contemporary account or view, or even conception, of childhood. The one index available to us is the immediate link that the notion of 'having children' denotes, and indeed signifies above all: the family unit. Within the patriarchal makeup of early modern English society, the family unit with the father at the head was conceived as a direct analogy of the political relationship between king and court, and by extension all of his subjects. The role of the maturing male child in this context would have been difficult to say the least: "unlike the lowest members of a social hierarchy, children are destined to become kings and queens themselves one day. ... By destiny, all children are usurpers, and all growth is potentially rebellious." To the elder members of society, the adolescent child represented not only the hope for the future, but great anxiety and even possible threat.

impressment, citing seven of Giles' new intake (including the yet-to-be-famous Nathan Field and Salomon Pavy) and saying that all seven were in "noe way able or fitt for singing, or... to be taught to sing" and that his own son Thomas had been carried off in order "to exercise the base trade of a mercenary enterlude player, to his utter loss of tyme..." Chambers, The Elizabethan Stage, Vol 2, p. 44.

Such interpretations of generational power were certainly not unknown to writers at this time, and indeed they have been especially associated with William Shakespeare’s work for the Lord Chamberlain’s Men and the King’s Men: “[f]antasies of freedom in Shakespeare tend to take the form of escapes from the tyranny of elders to a world where the children can make their own society, which usually means where they can arrange their own marriages.”

New family as new order: the child, marginalised, offers a view of both the potential for the subversion of the family unit, and the triumph of the power of that unit. Orgel continues his argument by positing the ultimately subversive “fantasy of freedom” as being the return to childhood implied by Leontes in the opening scene of The Winter’s Tale (c1610), “a retreat from sexuality and the dangers of manhood...” This fantasy childhood is essentially conceived as a retreat from a society constituted by vice and temptation, and thus also from the forces of control that police it; a retreat from guilt, and from the watchful forces of signification which have helped build it up.

This retreat operates as a drawing-away from the predicament that Patricia Fumerton outlines in her discussion of banqueting-houses, being the void of self. This is the dark emptiness encountered in the subjective gap between public subjectivity and private subjectivity, and which feeds into an understanding of the doubt that

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9 Orgel, “Nobody’s Perfect...” p. 10. “Looking on the lines Of my boy’s face, methoughts I did recoil Twenty-three years, and saw myself unbreeched, In my green velvet coat; my dagger muzzled, Lest it should bite its master and so prove, As ornaments oft does, too dangerous.”

existed concerning the grounds upon which visible identity could be formed. Any cultural discourse of identity constructed in this way conventionally begins with the child, as representing the first step into any constituent selfhood, and indeed the traditional "Ages of Man" speech that the character Jaques rehearses in Act II of As You Like It is a contemporary example of this. The child functions as embryonic matter to which the individual returns in old age, and indeed the two states were proverbially compared with each other. As has already been pointed out, however, the child was more often taken completely out of the equation, as "who sees a child sees nothing." Social identity was linked to social visibility, and as such was constituted as a state of being separate from childhood: it was a matter of rival subjectivities, mediated through the strategies of seeing and of self-fashioning. Self, if it existed at all, was something constituted out of a will to survive, and for all the normative structures that insisted upon the innate accountability of the self, these structures were themselves constructed along a "bias" to use Aminter's image.

The figure of the child, by which I mean both the young child and the adolescent, therefore occupied a troubling role within this discourse of cultural identity, particularly when it took to such liminoid activities as acting upon the stage. It is these difficult issues of identity and its generation which, on a broader level, Lacan approaches and addresses, and this is the reason why the modes of thought which his work articulates occupy a position within this thesis. Lacan views the individual as taking an intense interest, and participating, in the goings-on around it, ceaselessly associating and creating, constituting significations in an effort to quantify otherness, and as such 'selfhood'. Lacan approaches the function of the subject as
a means of understanding the problem of the self, encountered in the difference set between "sufficiency" and "lack". It is an issue of place, the subject's place in language providing a model which extends to a discussion of the subject's place in regard to 'where' it sees itself. Tackling the Cartesian model of cogito ergo sum in his article "Agency of the letter in the unconscious", he makes the point that "[i]t is not a question of knowing whether I speak of myself in a way that conforms to what I am, but rather of knowing whether I am the same as that of which I speak."\textsuperscript{10} Or, put another way, in relation to the line of sight, "[w]hen in love, I solicit a look, what is profoundly unsatisfying and always missing is that - You never look at me from the place from which I see you."\textsuperscript{11} Identity is represented here through the desire of the subject to dis-cover where or who 'he or she' is - the things which create or form the impressions of selfhood. The routes of selfhood, the means by which a discourse of self is manufactured, are mediated through a discussion of language, which in turn is seen to operate as a structure built up out of links, gaps and lines of association. Identity as such is therefore built up out of negotiation and exchange, through the energy exchanged between rival subjectivities. Many identities of the subject can emerge in this way, merging into a smooth, seamless, impermeable skin of selfhood, a version of the self which Lacan terms the 'imaginary', the self propelled into a fictional relation, or a projection of fulfilment.

Signification, the relationship of signifier and signified, finds an analogy for the back-and-forth movement between lack and sufficiency in the paired but contrasting strategies of poetic representation, metaphor and metonymy. Metaphor fills and engulfs,

\textsuperscript{10} Lacan, "The agency of the letter in the unconscious..." p. 165.
it is the verifiable signifier upon which so much that goes on in the theatre relies, being a patent, captivating illusion, enhancing and condensing meaning. Metonymy, on the other hand, is shrouded and suggestive, manifesting lack in the way that it operates through implication. Where metaphor affects solidity, one can say that metonymy is closer to fluidity with its tricks, feints and shifts. In the case of Lady Epicoene, the self is constituted in the way that signs in theatre generally are, through the verifiability of metaphor. She is as she appears, occupying the space allocated, patently female. Yet this identity can only be built up through the strategies of metonymy in order to produce her-self, strategies, or lacks, which are displaced onto all of the other characters after her dis-covery, as the veil of illusion that the gaze constitutes for those watching is subverted. The desire for sufficiency which has been superimposed onto the actors' bodies is 'found out'; with Epicoene bare-headed, the void of self, that avoided and denied gap in subjective experience, derides that gaze which so privileges private subjectivity. This theatre of the child actor which is identified here, built up through metonymy, enacts a model of signification which tests the possibilities and grounds of representability, showing and yet not showing. The avoidance of pain implied in the ambivalent and self-effacing posture which appears characteristic of the public lives of children in this period, becomes modulated to include as well the possibility for discovering an avoidance within the self, a strategy of survival which ensures servitude ever after. It is to this darker side of metonymy that Lacan refers when he asks "[d]oes not this form, which gives its field to truth in its very oppression, manifest a certain servitude inherent in its
presentation?" The possibilities which such modes of thought suggest open up means of approaching or linking the symbolic language out of which the dramaturgy of this theatre of boy actors formed shapes, movements and words.

When viewed within psychoanalytic thinking, one can regard the imagined gesture of "freedom" that Leontes alludes to in his speech in I.i of The Winter's Tale as being itself dependent upon, or growing through, a kind of signification. The "freedom" in the case of Leontes is very much an Edenic freedom from signification, and in the context of Lacanian signification, it would constitute a desired renegotiation of what Lacan terms the 'imaginary,' through which this 'retreat' implies not so much the dismantling of a particular signification, as a retreat into signification, displacement, metonymy. It is like a gesture of self-effacement, of hiding from anticipated punishment. In Lacan's essay on the "Agency of the letter in the unconscious," the signifier is described as constituting a field or network of signification, with "metonymy" forming one side. Lacan sees metonymy in terms of displacement, or scattering, a form which derides itself as it operates like a kind of trick, seemingly resisting both form and formation in the very suggestion of form. As Jane Gallop has put it, "[t]he latency, the hiddenness of metonymy... lends it an appearance of naturalness or passivity so that 'realism'... appears either as the lack of tropes, or as somehow mysterious, the 'dark continent' of rhetoric." Citing this desired freedom, we could well ask, along with Lacan, "what does man find in metonymy if not the power to circumvent the obstacles of social censure?"

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site of the child - especially the child-as-heir-apparent - refers us to the potentially dangerous ambiguities that were constructed for it in the constituting of the Jacobean family, a danger apparent in the gentle nudging of what we now call the Oedipus complex seen in Leontes’ reference to his (imagined) muzzled dagger.\textsuperscript{15} The idea of the child in this context operates as a kind of metonymy, that in its very obscuring and channelling refers back to the signifying structure of metaphor that the father here embodies. It is in the context of this structure, the relationship with the father, that the signifier “freedom” admits its “other side,” from which it tries to hide: the solid, patent metaphor which in this case threatens self-annihilation.

‘Childhood’ as a condition gestured towards self-effacement, the ready acceptance of social inferiority so that it “may preempt Oedipal antagonism, since the children deflect their aggression against themselves in hopes of winning love and living harmoniously with their parents.”\textsuperscript{16} This deferral or displacement operates as a strategy of the unconscious “as the most appropriate means... to foil censorship”\textsuperscript{17}; an act of survival against the odds. It is like a gesture, a theatrical turn in the drama of the individual’s formation, which operates by staging the self-effacement of the child-like ‘author’ towards the ‘father’/audience, the point of origin and source of the gaze. Like the patient that “cries out through his symptom,”\textsuperscript{18} so this “scene” is played out through the stage, or more accurately through the semiology of the theatre, which is signified in this case by the actors - themselves authors-by-extension in terms of their relationship to the roles they played - who were in this case literally

\textsuperscript{15} Orgel, “Nobody’s Perfect”, p. 10 - citing The Winter’s Tale, I.ii.156.
\textsuperscript{17} Lacan, “Agency of the letter...” p. 160.
\textsuperscript{18} ibid., p. 167.
children and young adolescents. The stage is, as demonstrated in the first chapter, an enactment within this context of what has been called the desire-to-gaze: the privileging of the audience's collective 'eye,' and through it their subjectivity.

As in the amphitheatre of the outdoor playhouse, the actors sued through their performances for the audience's attention, in a way that we might for example compare to the strategies in which courtiers engaged in order to secure the patronage that client-status entailed. The performance itself was a part of the act, a gift of embodying that actively referred to the relationship of client to patron, and the sanctioned gap that existed between them. What is so extraordinary here, however, is that in these indoor theatres it is the very performance itself, the negotiation between higher and lower states, that assumes centre-stage. The case of Epicoene covertly demonstrates that the one urban relationship which this theatre explored more than any other was the highly localised one between actors and audience that existed within the duration of a performance - and what this relationship produced: the sanctioned representation of identity. The social ambivalence of city comedy as a theatre-form becomes a cue, therefore, to an understanding not only of the content of the drama, but also its immediate context, referring to and enacting an 'in-between' state simultaneously. This ambivalence, which turns again and again on the taking of identity - either in the assuming of another's name, or being mistaken for another - ultimately locates the 'in-between-ness' in or upon the surface of the body itself. The very idea that an identity can be taken, or, more dangerously, that it can be mistaken, mis-placed, refers to and relies upon a closed binary construction of identity, that it has an inside (a 'core') and an outside (a 'surface'), and that identity in turn is based upon a mediation
between the two. The implication is that this ‘mediation,’ this self-fashioning, could in turn effect a misrepresentation, a slipping between identities for profit or intrigue, a scenario which threatens to upset the constituent boundaries between one individual and another, and between one state of selfhood and another - licit and illicit - by demonstrating the real permeability of such boundaries.

One boundary, or surface or skin that constituted such a boundary, was the ‘skin’ of dramatic form alone. In many of the plays performed in this era, the silent conventions that surrounded the viewing of a dramatic performance - what Keir Elam and others term “framing devices”\(^{19}\) - were themselves offered as the content of the play as well as the context. The forms by which these transparent transactions are made opaque in plays generally about this time - the direct address, the induction, the aside, all

bring attention to bear on the dramatic and theatrical realities in play, on the fictional status of the characters, on the very theatrical transaction... and so on. They appear to be cases of ‘breaking frame’, since the actor is required to step out of his role and acknowledge the presence of the public, but in practice they are licensed means of confirming the frame by pointing out the pure facticity of the representation.\(^{20}\)

These are positive devices, transmitting to the audience the idea that ‘this is a play’ in a richly layered fashion and allowing the focus of eye and ear to shift back and forth across the stage without turning away. In the context of such a play as *Hamlet* or *Othello* they assert, and indeed involve, the role of structure and ceremony upon which they rely, without detracting from the theatrical presentation. In the plays of the boy companies - and here *Epicoene* stands as an extreme example - these devices, the inductions, the ‘candid’ prologues, become more common and more ambiguous as the form of the play


\(^{20}\) *ibid.*, p. 90.
itself, and the dramaturgical relationship between players and spectators, blurs and shifts, inversely highlighting the normative structures of containment.

As the actors stand speechless after Epicoene’s unmasking, the association between direct address and confirmation of liminal differentiation has been diverted into a highly liminoid moment, and so a question arises - ‘is this a play?’ Similarly in the induction of The Knight of the Burning Pestle when George asks the gallants at the side of the stage to make way for his wife, ‘is this a play?’ In both these cases, the implication is that the tactics of negotiation surrounding the desire for possession (of status, wealth, ‘identity,’ etc.) foregrounded in so many of the boy-company plays, city comedies especially, were being extended to encompass the local relationship of actor and spectator, play and audience. In this way the ‘play,’ through its performance, refers to its own form, its skin, and refers to it as something potentially monstrous, ill-defined, strange. There are no clear divisions, apart from the physical division of stage and auditorium - which was itself blurred by the seating of gallants on stage. This is despite the sense that the plays put on at Blackfriars or Paul’s were highly structured and ceremonial, with, for example, the interludes between acts being marked by music and dance, whilst the stage was being cleared and the candles trimmed. Indeed, these divisions were themselves played upon, as was seen with the interludes in Burning Pestle being filled out with George and his wife’s commentary on the skill of the dancers or musicians, or the more subtle dramaturgical references and uses of interlude-music and the musicians themselves in Epicoene, such as at Morose’s ‘wedding feast.’
As with the induction to *The Isle of Gulls*, a specific performance-practice or semiology has been extended to the point where 'performance' is in some senses quite distinct and separate from 'play' though each is implicated in the other. The 'form' or practice of the performance was something both inalienable and yet completely alien to the surface of the play, and there is a clear sense of the 'play' - the corporation of 'characters' - having to negotiate a way through the dense, shadowed, structure of the situation of staging: the relationship of characters and actors to their audience. Here is a stage where evidently little could be taken for granted, where every opening or opportunity was open to doubt and negotiation, and even the most formulaic plot device could seem bizarre. The editor of *The Isle of Gulls*, comparing Day to Lyly, makes this comment:

The cleverness of Day's art does not succeed in submerging it. While this strain [the use of a remote setting] in Lyly's plays is directly related to their mythological character, there is nothing ethereal about Day's. It is instead as though, watching the single-minded pursuit of maidenheads, bedfellows, and gold, we behold the scramblings of another species...\(^{21}\)

This experience of theatrical estrangement, of being alienated by the supposedly-familiar, is comparable to a semiotic practice in 20th century theatre which is most commonly referred to by the name Bertold Brecht gave it, *verfremdungseffekt*. As a device in modern dramaturgy, it encourages the spectator to "take note of the semiotic *means*, to become aware of the sign-vehicle and its operations".\(^{22}\) In Brecht's epic theatre, therefore, the act of representation may be depicted as an event - in progress - in itself, a *gestus*: "as when the actor stands aside in order to comment upon what is happening, or a rendering opaque of representational means through a range of

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devices such as freezes, slow-motion effects, unexpected changes in lighting, etc."^{23} The technical resources of the 17th century stage, and so the means for effecting any form of 'estrangement' in this way, were restricted to the primary means of contact between theatre and audience: costume, language, stage, and actor. And it was in the body of the child actor, I would maintain, that this theatre found its most viable 'alienation device.'

Obviously it can be misleading to imply an ahistorical one-on-one comparison between one kind of theatre and another in this way. Different cultural contexts and needs are being met and articulated. Nevertheless, this connection is an important one, as it points to other, less 'visible' issues and connecting strands in the understanding of how the theatre of the boy companies operated and was seen to operate and in turn it points to possible audience [positions] and reading responses. The most important connection to make in this regard is fundamentally a theoretical one, affecting the conception of the structure or form of such plays. If one were to approach the presence of the boy actor as an elemental 'device' in this way, one must re-evaluate how the dramaturgical study of such plays as Epicoene or Bussy D'Ambois can take place. How, after all, can we reconstruct a 'reading' of such moments as the final unmasking in Epicoene without re-thinking how "Epicoene the play" as an event would have been constituted.

Traditional theories of dramatic form have embodied the work of a play as being structured around an anticipated moment of crisis or perrepeteia, a reversal of fortune when the natures of the characters depicted on stage converge either farcically or tragically, to be

^{23} ibid., p. 18.
concluded by some form of dénouement, either cathartic or not. This
privileging of a formal moment within the text effectively structures
the whole of it, constructing the play itself as a formal, discrete entity,
with a clearly marked inside and outside. The ‘play’ as such presumes
this moment. Reading the form of theatrical texts in this way, the
audience begins to assume a greater subjective role, a role which
informs the manner in which a completed play could be said to be
‘readable’ or ‘seeable’ by a ‘literate’ public, a literacy which is however
dependent upon the structure that such a form unconsciously
inscribes. Bussy D’Ambois, Epicoene, The Isle of Gulls, Marston’s The
Dutch Courtesan and other plays of the boy company repertoire do not
depart from received notions of dramatic form, but ‘form’ is
nevertheless a problematic feature in each of these plays to varying
degrees. We have already seen how the Herculean language of
Bussy’s moment of crisis is subtextually undercut by the less-than-
heroic circumstances that led to it. Similarly, the farcical convergence
marking the final scenes of The Isle of Gulls is significantly
unstructured in its discovery of gullery, and particularly in the
conspicuously under-stated way in which the villain Dametas is
exposed, as well as the out-gulling of Lisander and Demetrius, who
from the beginning of the play have been set up to be the heroes of the
piece. If theatre can be said to be a representation of life, then in these
plays it can clearly be said that life gives way to ‘theatre.’ In Epicoene
this structural debate is possibly at its most visible.

The moment of reversal or perepeteia, and the best candidate for
identification as a privileged moment in the text, is arguably the
moment of Epicoene’s discovery near the end of the play, though it
could equally as easily be Morose’s admission of impotence a few
moments earlier, or even the staged gulling of Daw and La Foole a
whole act earlier. In the plotting of the narrative, the final discovery-scene lends itself best to these terms - and is certainly an extraordinary moment - yet if this is a fundamental point of crisis, the crisis exists not in the play but in the theatre, and has been in evidence ever since the play began. The effect of this scene in the theatre is to potentially de-stabilise the subjective relationship of spectator and actor, with the upsetting of the grounds of the character Epicoene's female signification. Roles as such become ambivalent, a matter of casting. Within the play, this moment is pointedly ignored by Truewit's 'epilogue' which follows, so that as a 'true' peripeteia it fails, with the action clumsily diffusing in a style that is mirrored by Morose's unspecified departure from the stage. There is a strong sense that the characters themselves are trapped by the cultural and signifying structures out of which they have been generated, so that no amount of reversal or recognition could 'redeem' them. Morose escapes from the stage, leaving Truewit to awkwardly complete the play. Nothing in the play is as certain as it was previously; with the ratifying structure of signification loosened and dissipated, the very basis of representation becomes suspect and highly self-conscious. The moment of Epicoene's discovery performs form, inserting it so as to rapidly fulfil Dauphine's role in the plot, whilst at the same time betraying this notion of dramaturgical form as constituent. I would argue that it is less a singular moment of crisis as it is a moment which meditates upon the 'crisis' out of which the whole play - as a performed event - has been constituted.

The actors are on stage for the extent of the play, and in a quite crucial way they are the play, the everpresent condition of its performance, the conventional and unexceptional means by which the audience 'see' the play. Yet like a Brechtian "a-effect" they
problematise, objectifying in this play particularly by their very presence the unspoken, culturally-sanctioned relationship between stage and auditorium that constitutes theatre. The binary model of liminal and normative, play and work, role and identity, with each supporting and feeding off the other, has been upset and itself displaced. In this way, I would suggest that the moment of Epicoene's discovery resists any formal privileging of a revelatory temporal structure, and points instead towards a kind of ambiguous temporality, an unvoiced continuum of subversion which makes awkwardly visible the means and motivations behind the achievement of form. In Epicoene the setting is literally 'here and now,' wherever or whenever that happens to be, with the seated audience as much a part of what happens on stage as the players.

An analogy to this understanding of the skin or surface of drama as a social act is Victor Turner's discussion of liminality in ritual contexts, and this connection is worth pursuing. As a structured crossing between one state and another, the passage across the *limen* operates in phases as follows:

The first phase, separation, comprises symbolic behaviour signifying the detachment of the individual or the group from either an earlier fixed point in the social structure or from an established set of cultural conditions... During the intervening liminal period, the state of the liminal subject... becomes ambiguous, neither here nor there, betwixt and between all fixed points of classification; he passes through a symbolic domain that has few or none of the attributes of his past or coming state. In the third phase the passage is consummated and the ritual subject, the neophyte or initiand reenters the social structure often, but not always, at a higher status level.24

The stage, as well as operating as a point of showing or discovering, also separates and exposes: a fact which the prologues of plays written for the boy companies allude to again and again in their polite yet

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nevertheless direct, mollifying addresses to the audience. These actors inhabited a domain marked by ambivalence and ambiguity, manifestly inferior to the members of their audience in any other social context, yet within it staging strategies and negotiations which constituted the pursuit of self as constructed in this culture. What this theatre enacted, however, was no culturally-sanctioned carbon copy in miniature, but something quite different. As with any liminal experience, this theatre is just as much concerned with that which is expelled, censured, forbidden:

We play roles, occupy statuses, play games with one another, don and doff many masks, each a “typification.” But the performances characteristic of liminal phases and states often are more about the doffing of masks, the stripping of statuses, the renunciation of roles, the demolishing of structures, than their putting on and keeping on. Antistuctures are performed, too. But, still within the liminal frame, new subjunctive, even ludic, structures are then generated, with their own grammars and lexica of roles and relationships.25

The shifting, ambiguous "grammar" of the boy companies' theatre was one which not only tested the bounds of conventionality and representation in the theatre, but also one which attracted writers, or writing-activities, which literally activated the attention of state censorship. From 1604 through to 1606, the Children of Blackfriars in particular were involved in censorship scandals following the performances of plays which were seen to allude libellously to James I and his administration.26 In this area, culture, state and self begin to overlap, and the personal and the political run side by side in both the

26 "These included the trouble over Jonson's Sejanus in 1603, over Samuel Daniel's Tragedy of Philotas in 1604, and four plays in which James himself had been the perceived object of satire, [Marston's] The Dutch Courtesan [and] The Fawn, and the collaborative Eastward Ho and The Isle of Gulls..." Patterson, A. Censorship and Interpretation. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984) p. 64. Annabel Patterson goes on to say that “[these ‘scandals’] remind us both that activity is generated reciprocally by writers and censors; and that flurries of prohibitions, penalties or of ‘scandals’ in the theater were likely to be symptomatic of tensions generated outside the theater.”
formation of relationships and the occupying of statuses. On a larger historical scale, this was a period of emerging nationalism, when the concept of the 'nation-state' that had begun to be articulated during Elizabeth's reign was still struggling for pre-eminence, and in consequence the freedom of its citizens was still subject to political controversy, very far from being taken for granted. In establishing the extents and limits of expression within the Jacobean State, the cultural implication of censorship was essentially the internalisation of the formation of that state into the patterns and content of published language. Equating legitimation with 'readability' in this way, one could follow Annabel Patterson's highly suggestive argument, that "it is to censorship that we in part owe our very concept of 'literature,' as a kind of discourse with rules of its own".27

Censorship, in this sense, forms a kind of skin, a discursive barrier beyond which the very act of utterance - especially if inscribed onto that other skin, paper - could lead, literally, to physical mutilation. Such a fate initially awaited Chapman and Jonson for their part in Eastward Ho! (1606), and was actually exercised on William Prynne for his Histriomastix (1633). This threat of physical mutilation, mirroring the supposed injury inflicted on the body politic, sets up a kind of dichotomy of experience, legitimate and illegitimate, 'inside' and 'outside,' which finds expression through the expelling or voiding that censorship inscribed. Taking the operation of the body politic as an extension of the constitution or construction of the self, this model relates well to Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytical use of the term 'abjection', which to her refers to that fragile point in self-construction which the self assiduously denies; the unreasonable,

27 ibid., p. 4.
unnamable domain of self-loathing which characterises the effort to identify.

In the formation of the human individual, the abject is seen as a product of the struggle for self-authentication away from the mother, for whom the child/subject serves as "token of her own authentication." It may be useful to quote Kristeva in full on this point:

In this struggle, which fashions the human being, the mimesis, by means of which he [sic] becomes homologous to another in order to become himself, is in short logically and chronologically secondary. Even before being like, "I" am not but do separate, reject, ab-ject. Abjection, with a meaning broadened to take in subjective diachrony, is a precondition of narcissism. It is coexistent with it and causes it to be permanently brittle. The more or less beautiful image in which I behold or recognize myself rests upon an abjection that sundering it as soon as repression, the constant watchman, is relaxed.

As the individual is formed, the target of this reluctant struggle turns from 'the mother' into 'an abject,' and the actions of rejecting and repelling come to be exercised against the self, or rather against that part of the self that is abjected: the grounds of its own formation.

It is important to note here that a moment or stage specified in this formative struggle is that of 'separation,' whereby the embryonic self begins to form a subjectivity of its own. That the image above is "beautiful" is itself dependent upon a given culture's repertoire of concepts and images: a repertoire which has itself been built up within a binary order of inclusion and exclusion. In trying to arrive at a space or point from which one can see the distant manoeuvres of Jacobean subjectivity, and in particular the appearance of the boy companies as a vital expression of this, I would suggest that by approaching liminality via abjection, and vice versa, we may be able to understand

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29 *ibid.*, p. 13.
the role taken by such an unstable undertaking in the midst of a society, and indeed a city, that relied intensely upon the security that order and containment - the act of being included - allowed. Defining abjection through analogy, Kristeva says "[i]t is... not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor..."30 Abjection emerges through the possibility, or the implied threat, of liminal movement. The abject denies the stable polarity of inner and outer that the subject affects, in that to imagine enclosing the body in a seamless, bounded surface is to risk being exploded by the very excremental filth that it fears.31 In this way, the abject represents an insistence on the manner in which 'inner' and 'outer' can be made sense of only through the mediation of a stable, culturally-sanctioned boundary, an insistence which takes the form of a question: "why do we see this way?"

The liminal moment is one conventionally conceived within a temporal framework; indeed, in the context of early ritual time is precisely what liminality is about, as the neophyte passes into a new state, a new age. The ambiguous time of plays such as Epicoene, however, defers any such passage, preferring instead to revolve just outside any constituent notion of time, apart from the implied space of one 'day' which contains the narrative. This sense of timelessness is effected through the manipulation of form within the play, as I have already outlined in regard to the 'dissolving' peripeteia, and also in terms of the formal limits of the plays, where the play-as-

30 ibid., p. 4.
performance could be said to begin and end. Liminality constitutes both a phase and a condition, and its permanence as a feature during any performance could be said here to initiate a shift into the self-conscious realm of the liminoid. The tone is set often at the beginning, following the ambiguous entrances of Prologues who directly address the audience, or the strange inductions of Burning Pestle or The Isle of Gulls, with their depictions of audience members seating themselves upon the stage. The time is now, specifically, and yet it is a ‘now’ depicted on stage, a fiction, ambiguous yet precise, separate from ‘real time’ whilst still referring to that reality. In the particular case of Epicoene, this sense of time is accentuated by having it set during the time of the plague, allowing Clerimont to refer to “the perpetuity of ringing” (I.i.174) as the church bells of the city, instead of marking the hours, toll out a constant passage of life into death. Kristeva’s model of the abject, the amorphous inhabitant of the no-man’s-land within and between boundaries, of questioned corporeality, growth and temporal movement similarly appears in terms of “a time of oblivion and thunder, of veiled infinity and the moment when revelation bursts forth.”

The play and the players that signify it are part, product and expression of the culture to which they belong, and yet as a part of their function in the culture they are constructed as being apart, objectifiable, focussed. Viewing theatre as a liminoid act, however, means that it “may also be the venue and occasion for the most radical scepticism - always relative, of course, to the given culture’s repertoire of sceptical concepts and images - about cherished values and rules.” The scepticism here rests upon the conventional,

32 Kristeva, Powers of Horror, p. 9.
33 Turner, The Anthropology of Performance, p. 102.
unarticulated manner in which cultural identities and boundaries are themselves constituted and sanctioned. This is most notoriously exemplified in the theatre of the boy companies, and in particular in *Epicoene*, in the depiction of gender - any gender - on stage.

**The Play of Gender**

The relationship of gender to identity in Stuart culture locates an index to many of the tensions and controversies surrounding the constitution of the self, and was a source of great tension, particularly in regard to female identity. The fixing of gender difference played a fundamental role in the fixing of social order, in that it set in place an irrevocable binary order around which formed an ideology steeped in bounded opposing states: "patriarchy, class and hierarchy all presupposed a law of gender difference which was at once divinely, naturally and socially laid down, the law descending from the first through the second to the third." Yet the very grounds upon which such difference could be constructed not only proved susceptible to the threat of disruption by on- and off-stage transvestism; the philosophical understanding of how the issues of sexual identity and difference could be linked and constituted - essentially, what 'sex' was - was finding itself on increasingly shaky ground.

Traditionally, the genital structure of the human body was seen to manifest a homology of form, a unitary sex based on a notion of sexual metamorphosis that took place during pregnancy. Over the centuries, this model had come to encompass two seemingly contradictory accounts of the origin of gender:

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on the one hand, a single individual is in reality double, since all bodies contain both male and female elements; on the other hand, there are not two radically different sexual structures but only one - outward and visible in the man, inverted and hidden in the woman.\textsuperscript{35}

This notion of 'one sex/one body', differentiated through the predominance of one internal element over another, effectively silenced - even erased - the female body within a discourse of patriarchal ideology. Contemporary anatomists who wrote about female sexual organs had no recourse seemingly, but to name and describe what they found purely in terms of the male body, which was seen as complementary to the female. The deployment of the competing internal elements could remain unresolved right through adolescence, with the male child often passing through an "effeminate" stage before reaching a state of adult manhood. As one contemporary put it, "[b]y how much more the masculine atoms abound in a female infant, by so much more the foetus is stronger, healthier, and more man-like, a virago. If the female atoms abound much in a male infant, then is that issue weak and effeminate..."\textsuperscript{36} Full female identity, therefore, involved submission to a principle of weakness, accepting and expecting a degree of debilitation. Characteristically passive and cold, 'women' were, definably, the weaker sex.

Following the 17th century example of Jacques Duval's \textit{On Hermaphrodites, Childbirth, and the Medical Treatment of Mothers and Children}, Stephen Greenblatt's article "Fiction and Friction" discusses the tropes and conditions of sexual representation through a consideration of the prodigious, and in particular Duval's own example of the hermaphrodite Marin/Marie le Marcis. For Duval,

\textsuperscript{35} Greenblatt, \textit{Shakespearean Negotiations}, p. 77.
\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 78.
presented with a body that contained both female and male organs, the case of Marin opened up and exemplified the whole problem of gender, providing the opportunity to follow and yet at the same time marginalise the historically-sanctioned beliefs of sexual difference. Marin, as hermaphrodite, is deemed prodigious in Duval’s view not because of the mingling of male and female characteristics, but because these characteristics have been manifested so readily upon the surface of ‘his’ body. In Duval’s account, Marin does not represent an example of sexual metamorphosis, of woman re-forming into man, but rather “an embodied transvestism that momentarily confounds sexual categories only to give way in the end to the clarification of gender and hence to proper, communally sanctioned, identity.”

Open ed up to full view upon the table of Duval’s operating theatre, Marin is ‘dis-covered,’ with his sex, like Epicoene’s, revealed to have been always already there. The point is, however, that the ‘authentic’ sex to be discovered is, and can only be, the male - a conclusion which by happening to fit within the inherited assumptions of medical tradition, simultaneously confirms them and yet pushes them to a level of extreme grotesquetry.

In this way, the notion of a structural homology between the male and the female body - and with it the possibility that the female could, under the influence of heat, be sublimated into the male form - is at once maintained as a mode of understanding, yet marginalised; useful as a normative discourse, but unproveable. Instead, having the body itself understood as a “natural transvestite” brings to the discourse of anatomical study similar uncertainties to those being encountered in everyday Jacobean London, of which the Hic-Mulier

37 *ibid.*, p. 82.
controversy of the early 1620s and the transvestite theatre stand as two examples. It is in the ambivalent nature of transvestism that whilst it "represents a structural identity between man and woman... it does not present this identity as a reality." Formed out of, and in response to, a notion of sexual identity that was teleologically male, transvestism followed up its insistence upon verifiable signs by isolating gender, making into an outward, representational form the signification of an originating, internalised identity. This was a culture where the need to distinguish genders was of vital social importance, reflecting the assumption that identity, of which gender was a part, could only be constituted out of difference - out of what it was not - and that what was identified simultaneously constituted a social position. The lack of a secure etiology for gender differentiation in the medical sciences led to the possibility of fundamental conflict borne out of not only the forcible determining of difference, but also the friction between boundaries, between contradictory theories of sexual origin, out of which a path had to be negotiated in order to quantify identity.

Transvestism offered a more subversive threat to normative codes of identification than it is seen to now. As I have sought to demonstrate, one could not take for granted the unambiguous differentiation between the sexes in this time in the way that we now do, beyond the maintaining of encoded social boundaries. The ambiguous form of the transvestite softened and inverted the polar structure of culturally-inscribed gender difference, constructing

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38 Hic-Mulier or the Mannish Woman and Haec-Vir or the Womanish Man were two pamphlets printed and distributed in 1620 as part of a controversy of dress-violation surrounding the usurping of male dress by women.
39 Greenblatt, Shakespearean Negotiations, p. 82.
custom for example as the cause, rather than the effect, of gender.\textsuperscript{40} The female transvestites who so inflamed James I in 1620 with the outbreak of the *Hic-Mulier/Haec-Vir* pamphlet controversy drew on the tradition of the teleological construction of sex as male, with the notorious challenge at the end of the *Haec-Vir* pamphlet that women like the Hic Mulier figure\textsuperscript{41} have only become ‘man-like’ because men have become effeminate. In doing so as transvestites, however, and so performing their identification with masculinity as a fiction, their inversion demystified the ideological basis of gender difference whilst simultaneously performing physical sexual indifference as a spectacle. Claiming allegiance to the conventions of difference, the Hic Mulier figure instead maps a path of dissolution. The central theme of *Haec-Vir* is that custom, according to Hic Mulier, is “an idiot”,\textsuperscript{42} and

nowhere is her [use] of the idea more challenging than in the way she dissolves both law and ideological fixity into a celebration of change and transformation and, by implication, a celebration of her potential rather than her fixed nature: “Nor do I in my delight of change otherwise than as the whole world does.” (Sig.B)\textsuperscript{43}

By shamelessly changing her clothes, the “mannahish woman” expressed the abjection of this culture by aggressively re-inscribing herself in relation to the pre-existing boundaries of gender. The implications of this celebration of change and potential, of instituting the “time of abjection” suggested above, furthermore threatens to unlock what Stephen Orgel calls “the perilously achieved male identity.”\textsuperscript{44} By entering into a time which is constituted by change alone - in a period when solidity spelt progress - the growth to manhood as a principle of cultural predominance begins to look

\textsuperscript{40} Dollimore, “Subjectivity, Sexuality and Transgression...” p. 67.
\textsuperscript{41} the voice of the female transvestites in this pamphlet
\textsuperscript{42} *Haec-Vir*, Sig.B2, quoted in Dollimore, “Subjectivity, Sexuality and Transgression...” p. 67.
\textsuperscript{43} ibid., p. 67
\textsuperscript{44} Orgel, “Nobody’s Perfect...” p. 15.
increasingly vulnerable. In consciously putting on the clothes of masculine identity, visibly concealing her self and her sex, the Hic Mulier figure simultaneously sheds an identity fixed in relation to the construction of masculinity. At this point we can return our eyes to the role of the boy actors.

A familiar complaint directed toward the theatre in general and to boy actors in particular was the way in which it, in the language of Puritan thought, ‘effeminised.’ Phillip Stubbes’ Anatomy of Abuses (1583) presents a good example, calling the male actors of female roles “monsters, of both kinds, half women, half men.” The nature of this monstrosity almost defies definition for Stubbes, in that it is constituted solely in terms of its lack of an ‘essential nature,’ of any gender at all. Laura Levine suggests that “in this tract we can see the antithesis between the two opposites ‘monstrous’ and ‘no inherent nature’ collapse in the idea of the androgyne. The hermaphroditic actor becomes the embodiment of all that is frightening about the self.” By collapsing the possibility of difference, and with it the conventional constitution of identity, this figure points out a moment of denial that is bound up within the construction of the self, a moment of abjection. In this context, what the ‘effeminisation’ of the theatre refers to is the ‘de-masculinisation’ of identity that the transvestite stage acted out. As mentioned earlier, it was claimed that in male childhood one commonly experienced “a transition... from a state close to that of females... to one befitting an adult man.” Given that claim, one can say that in subverting the stable picture of gender as being structured around a singularly masculine orientation, the

46 ibid., p. 130.
47 Greenblatt, Shakespearean Negotiations, p. 78.
male transvestite on stage could at once embody several sexual identities within a role, staking out a common ground between the 'female' and the 'not-quite-male' which ultimately has a disjunctive effect on the representation of gender roles as such. As roles, genders dissolve in the playful layering of drag into social identities constructed within a binary network of sensuality that is solely reliant upon assumed dependence and passivity. As Lisa Jardine argues, "in the drama the dependent role of the boy player doubles for the dependency which is woman's lot, creating a sensuality which is independent of the sex of the desired figure, and which is particularly erotic where the sex is confused (when boy player represents woman, disguised as dependent boy)." 48 Initially displacing gender boundaries, and then collapsing them into socially-constituted boundaries of status, transvestism threatened at every turn to destabilise the cultural orders that maintained the differentiation of subject from abject. The theatre had become, in Phillip Stubbes' words, "Venus' Palace," a site fetishised, eroticised, feminised, 'femininity' here operating to unfix, signifying the potential for change, soliciting and seducing the audience into a space where ambivalent, protean roles and the conscious fashioning of the self are themselves normative rather than prodigious. 49

Having all the roles being played by adolescent boys, as in the theatre of the boy companies, this aspect of early modern theatre is brought into the highest relief. Here every actor, whether playing a

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man or a woman, is effectively a transvestite, as each gender role is as equally and inauthentically constituted as the next. To say that on the early modern English stage "only boys could, as it were, naturally play the woman's part..."\textsuperscript{50} rests within the assumption which constructed femininity and boyhood as equally 'incomplete', despite the Puritan objections to such cross-dressing as being in any way legitimate. Nevertheless, such assumptions effectively problematised the playing of 'the man's part' by a boy as well, as 'masculinity' was being degraded; in so doing the differences between the two genders became more a matter of ambivalent indifference, an issue of casting. Here especially Jonson's \textit{Epicoene} proves to be the most searching text and test of this theatre and its culture. In general terms, the men and the women in this play contrast generically not only with each other but also with the acceptable notions of conduct and attitude conventionally associated with them, making such links highly intangible. The women appear 'manly' and demonstrative, whilst the men appear almost passive, reserving their dynamism for such scenes as Truweit's highly theatrical confrontation with Morose in II.ii, the discussion of 'women' in IV.i, or the twin gulling of Daw and La Foole in IV.v. Lady Haughty, on the other hand, seems to embody above all the extraordinary energy with which notions of femininity were being identified, either consciously or unconsciously. The sense of a colonial adventure which pervades her attempted seduction of Dauphine operates in this context as yet another prefiguration of the relationship between theatre and audience. The "perfect courtier" (V.ii.29) of Stubbets' Palace of Venus, she entreats and flatters her audience with "it is the price and estimation of your virtue only

\textsuperscript{50} Greenblatt, \textit{Shakespearean Negotiations}, p. 184, n. 40.
that hath embark'd me to this adventure" (V.ii.1-2): in reaching out to meet Dauphine, she desires to transcend ever further her own nominal boundaries. When Morose first sets eyes upon her and her companions, he cries out "[a]nother flood! An inundation! I shall be overwhelmed..." (III.vi.2-3) and as Centaure puts it, "she... loves nobody but for her uses, and for her uses she loves all" (V.ii.29-30).

Compared with this vision of near-monstrous excess, the constructions of masculinity in this play appear not so much dependent upon such strategies of solicitation and captivation as upon the tighter circle of what Eve Sedgewick terms "homosocial desire," which involves the ratification of masculine identity through the structured maintenance of male friendship bonds.51 This structure is rehearsed in such scenes as IV.i, but its effects are perhaps best observed at the moments when, as a means of expressing and constituting masculinity, it fails. The 'public' ritual castration of La Foole that occurs at the end of IV.v is set up so as to mend a supposed rift between him and Daw, when in fact each have been duped similarly. In this way, we can see the pain that La Foole experiences when Dauphine tweaks his nose as indicative of the extent and intensity to which he has invested in his bond with Daw. Without his friends, he is nobody. Morose, on the other hand, has no friends at all, and indeed is highly suspicious of any bond that he makes with anyone. Of all the male characters, his masculinity is the most

51 The homosocial bond is structured in terms of "desire" in Sedgewick's model, as its energy is achieved through the overtly heterosexual "traffic in women". As an example, she cites a Restoration comedy, Wycherley's The Country Wife, and the aristocratic society it depicts could easily be transferred to the kind of sociability exhibited by La Foole and Daw in Epicoene, if only in terms of wishful thinking: "...the men's heterosexual relationships in the play have as their raison d'être an ultimate bonding between men; and that bonding, if successfully achieved, is not detrimental to 'masculinity' but definitive of it." Sedgewick, E. Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 50.
exposed to scrutiny: his is the only marriage of the play; he is the one with control over the financial wealth that is Dauphine's only chance of social survival. Similarly the most blatant demonstration of male power occurs at IV.ii when Morose "descends with a long sword"(IV.ii.106.1[s.d.]) in an effort to drive everyone out of his house with a demonstration of verifiable phallic power. This supposed patency is however overturned with his declaration of impotence in V.iv, a declaration which operates as a testament to the effort to identify within this context - or rather, it refers to a tension within the notion of 'identification' as a pre-conceived act.

Desperate to rid himself of Epicoene, who threatens to completely overturn his sense of self, he admits to "an infirmity which... I thought I might have conceal'd"(V.iv.35-6) - that he is "no man... [u]tterly unable in nature... to perform the duties or any the least office of a husband."(V.iv.40,42-3) The reaction to this is telling. To the collegiate ladies, this admission marks him as a "prodigious creature... [b]ridegroom uncarnate"(V.iv.44-5): he has 'broken the rules' in that he has lied through his body, asserting its 'authority' where in fact it had none. Epicoene, on the other hand, inverts the model of interiority that these assumptions work within, dismissing Morose's statement with "[t]ut, a device, a device, this, it smells rankly, ladies."(V.iv.48) Within this very riposte operates a scepticism that openly allows for such false representing of the body, which by extension articulates doubt over the whole differential operation of identification. Epicoene recognises that Morose's attempted 'concealment' operates within a discourse that privileges the coherence of the subject through a mediation between 'inner' and 'outer,' a discourse which her doubt both displaces and challenges. Epicoene's ready suspicion of self-fashioning - with the self extending
to and even under the very surface of the body - reflects a central problem inscribed within the strategies of self-identification, which she is in a unique position to comment on. The formation of identity is something which takes place through a mediating process of informing, a process which marginalises and silences. Judith Butler subversively summarises this problem with a question: "[h]ow does a body figure on its surface the very invisibility of its hidden depth?"52 How indeed, especially when one finds oneself on a transvestite stage, with its insistence upon verifiable signs, and its delight in the multiplication of identities? What is the open secret that no-one is talking about?

The movement towards silence, denial and fear of loss which this play charts in regard to issues of identity and representation is reasserted again and again, with Epicoene, the boy player ‘playing himself’ at the centre of it all. Epicoene initially operates as a prop, signifying Morose’s self-denial, however when she finds her voice she is suddenly confidently articulate and expressive, mixing easily with the collegiate ladies and ordering about her servants and her husband. Her vocal command arguably outdoes all of the other characters on stage, with her interrupted speech at the beginning of V.iv unmatched in its rhetoric. The flow is suddenly staunched, however, when Epicoene is unmasked. Epicoene falls completely silent, and no stage directions are assigned. The boy stands idly on the stage in his dress, a passive and empty travesty, with no role to screen him from the spectator’s paternal gaze. For Morose, within the fiction, seeing the boy as he is presents the comparatively simple yet utterly embarrassing conclusion that he has been duped, that his

52 Butler, J. *Gender Trouble*, p. 134.
'bargain' was a false commodity. For the audience in this culture, observing a performance of this play, however, the situation is somewhat more complex. The stage takes on a highly disjunctive appearance, with one boy actor on stage 'playing' a boy actor whilst the other boy actors maintain their roles as the fiction of the play carries on. Both the form of playing and the form of the play shifts and stagers around the edge that separates representation from reality and vice versa, as the narrative spills into Truewit's final speech which doubles as an epilogue addressed to the audience.

Nowhere is the risk and utter fragility of the transvestite stage more keenly felt than here. In a theatre where femininity was not differentiated by the juniority of the actor in the way of the outdoor playhouses, the very structure of identity is made to collapse. Bracing in its subversion, the patriarchal order that mediates, privileges and relies upon this fundamental structure of differentiation is here exposed as transvestite, manageable, actable - an illusion. It is, however, a subversion that cuts both ways. As the stage gently and subtextually implodes, the men and women of the audience emerge as the only stable point of reference for this theatre. Their massed presence alone confirms its dynamism, yet the illusion is achieved through their passivity: they must, like eager children, gaze silently upon the strange affairs of others. Maybe this theatre did in itself embody Stephen Orgel's notion of a subversive escape to childhood and its estranging vision, but only for a brief bubble of time away from the formality of the city. In Epicoene, they clap at the end to please Morose at Truewit's invitation, and the bubble bursts as they exercise their power. Outside the fiction, at the next remove, they are applauding a performance in which drama, as a means of social expression, marks out its own limits. In the moment of unmasking
the theatre has opened a way into its own end, a critical gap within the illusion which when 'staged' as it is here, causes the theatre to rend itself apart. The theatre-building becomes what it always has been, a house of illusion in which the play, the actors and the audience have all played their part. The action of clapping _Epicoene_, then, becomes both affirmative and subversive: affirmative because the audience-members are asserting their presence and their actuality outside the fiction of the play, and subversive because in clapping, they define themselves 'as audience' in reaction to a play which has in its final moments ambivalently portrayed itself, challenging the audience to prove its non-fictionality.
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