Jonson London and Urban Space.pdf

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PART II

Cultural and historical contexts
The city, as one finds it in history, is the point of maximum concentration for the power and culture of a community. It is the place where the diffused rays of many separate beams of life fall into focus, with gains in both social effectiveness and significance. The city is the form and symbol of an integrated social relationship: it is the seat of the temple, the market, the hall of justice, the academy of learning. Here in the city the goods of civilization are multiplied and manifolded; here is where human experience is transformed into viable signs, symbols, patterns of conduct, systems of order. Here is where the issues of civilization are focused: here, too, ritual passes on occasion into the active drama of a fully differentiated and self-conscious society.

Louis Mumford

Perhaps no other English author of the early seventeenth century was more attuned than Ben Jonson to the ways in which London and urban space more generally could function as ‘The form and symbol of an integrated social relationship’. Perhaps no other saw with such clarity the complex scenarios through which a city becomes a site of compression and of multiplication, a matrix where, as an idealistic Mumford points out, moral, commercial, legal and educational relations can converge into a unifying field of cohesive community. And perhaps no other took such bitter pleasure in pointing out the contemporary failures and fault-lines in this cohesive, communal space: the conflicting social possibilities, the degrading competitions over status or wealth and the deep injustices that accompanied the diversification and diffusion of commerce and civility in London and Westminster. Jonson was not the first to use drama, poetry and other art forms to investigate the spatial facts of urban dynamism and diversity, nor would he be the last. But his engagement with the city that was his lifelong home marks off a decidedly influential iteration of a long-standing pattern in literary and artistic expression in early modern England and, indeed, all over the world.
Jonson’s engagement with urban space took place on two basic levels: first, he repeatedly represented or made reference to different kinds of city sites in his poetry and drama; second, he laid out sets of directions for the active manipulation of urban space, in so far as he wrote plays, masques and pageants meant to be performed in and around London. Urban space, in other words, was both the subject and the object of much of his work – both his medium and, frequently, his imagined setting. Our current understanding of the tenor of this doubled take on the city in Jonson’s writing is grounded in the rich work being done by historians of London such as Vanessa Harding, Ian Archer, John Schofield and Julia Merritt. Much of the discussion that follows has been shaped by their discoveries.

By all accounts, Jonson’s London was a city in flux. By the time Jonson was born in 1572, London had begun its slow, steady transformation from a large, but by no means unusual walled medieval town into a sprawling centre for a nation’s interpenetrating political and economic networks. Over the course of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, government by the royal court and its associated administrative bodies became increasingly centralized in Westminster and Greenwich. The great London-based merchant-trading companies began to draw capital and commerce towards themselves and their city, consolidating its importance as a point of access for trade in the commonwealth and beyond. By James I’s reign, England’s gentry had begun to spend months on end in London’s growing, fashionable suburbs, attracted by the seasonal rhythms of the law courts, by the goods and services increasingly available in shops and marketplaces for luxury commodities like the New Exchange and by the city’s notorious entertainments, from its theatres and bear-baiting arenas to its taverns and brothels. Poorer labourers and artisans were drawn as well to the economic possibilities offered by London’s role as a center for informal commerce and production, such as the buying and selling of victuals, the trade in second-hand clothing and other petty wares and the rudimentary manufacturing and service industries that catered to the wealthier consumers of London, such as pin-making, starching and stocking-knitting.

Historical demography can give us a sense for the effect of these developments in Jonson’s day: according to some estimates, the population of London and its suburbs nearly doubled between 1548 and 1600 from 120,000 residents to 200,000, then doubled again to over 400,000 by 1650. We should not underestimate how surprising all this seemed to long-time city-dwellers, like Jonson himself. One of his contemporaries, the
urban chronicler Edmund Howes, was nothing less than flabbergasted by the changes that occurred in London between 1565 and 1615:

the unmeasurable and uncomparable encrease of all which commodities coming into this city, & the increase of howses, and Inhabitants, within the compasse and tearme of fifty yeeres, is such and so great, as were there not now two third parts, of the people yet living, having beeene eye witnes of the premises, and the bookes of the custome howse, which remain extant, the truth, and difference of all things afore mentioned were not to be Justified, and beeleeved.⁶

There were many writers – poets, dramatists, satirists, ballad-makers and others – who shared Howes’s bewilderment and fascination with the expansion of the city and who attempted to make logical and aesthetic sense of its transformation.⁷ Some, like the epigrammist Thomas Freeman, joked about it: in ‘London’s Progress’, he wonders whether suburbs that at the time seemed impossibly distant from one another might some day be connected (‘Hoggesdon will to Hygate ere’t be long’, he predicts).⁸ Some, like John Stow, looked back wistfully: his famous guide to the city, A Survey of London (1598), is shaped by his nostalgia for the simpler, more neighbourly London he knew in his youth. And some turned to legal forms of writing in an effort to achieve practical control over urban space. The large numbers of new homes being built in and around London and the practice of subdividing older buildings to create more – and often more decrepit – housing drew the attention of Elizabeth, James and Charles: each issued multiple proclamations over the course of his or her reign attempting to restrict the kinds of building being done in and around the city. None of these seems to have had any effect. City surveyors – including Jonson’s collaborator and eventual rival Inigo Jones – were sent out to police new construction and to issue fines against those who attempted to build without permission, but London simply continued its explosive growth.

Over the course of Jonson’s life, then, the quality of urban space in London was partially understood in terms of its rapid expansion, its ungovernable ‘increase’, and its mounting density. This, at least, would have been the long view. On a day-to-day basis, early modern Londoners would have been equally likely to experience the space of their city as a fairly stable built environment, as a series of interconnected neighbourhoods and parishes, streets and lanes, landmarks and reference points, each of which carried different associations and purposes for those who oriented their lives in relation to them. Indeed, even as John Stow looks back at a vanished London in A Survey – at the garden plots in Portsoken Ward that have taken the place of old drainage ditches he remembers, or at the ongoing attempts to repair the repeatedly defaced West Cheap cross
in the center of the City – each of his local histories sets out stabilizing urban knowledge that exists alongside of and functions in collaboration with his narratives of transition and spatial transformation. Jonson’s work as a playwright and a poet bears signs of a similar combination. With precision and with a native’s perspective, he calls up scenarios of local settlement and immediate knowledge that interact with the broader conception in the period that London’s growth and diversification over time put stress on and even threatened to undo the social fabric of the city.

Jonson has been called the first West End dramatist, and with good reason. *The Alchemist, Epicene, Bartholomew Fair, The Devil is an Ass, The Staple of News,* and *A Tale of a Tub* are all set within several miles of one another in the northern and western edges of the City of London and the area between the City walls and Westminster. Though a few of his other plays contain scenes set in the central and eastern districts of the City proper – the Folio version of *Every Man In His Humour* and the collaborative *Eastward Ho!,* for example – Jonson, like the Caroline and Restoration playwrights who would look to him as a model, was fascinated with the urbane, self-regarding society finding its place in London’s fashionable suburban districts. *Epicene* (1609), more than any other play by Jonson, embodies this pattern. Nearly every scene takes place in private households on or near the Strand, which was then the main thoroughfare connecting the commercial centre of London with the political complex at Westminster. By the middle of the sixteenth century, the Strand was lined with large, and sometimes enormous, homes for England’s wealthiest families; by the time *Epicene* was written, some of those homes had been subdivided and rented out to the rural gentry who had begun to converge on London. By the 1630s, land near the Strand had been built up with some of London’s first purposefully planned public squares and expensive housing developments, such as Lincoln’s Inn Fields and the Covent Garden piazza. But as Julia Merritt has recently pointed out, it would be a mistake to imagine that the West End was exclusively an elite space in the earlier decades of the seventeenth century. It was home to some of early modern London’s most noisome industries (leather-tanning, brewing and meat-butcher among them), and poor labourers lived all around the area of the Strand in dilapidated tenements. This basic fact of West End space is all but invisible in *Epicene.* The cast of characters is limited to the upper echelon of London society, and Jonson’s depiction of the neighbourhood is coloured accordingly. Truewit, Clerimont and Dauphine, the play’s three heroes, lounge about in Clerimont’s home gosiping and scheming; Sir Amorous La Foole is described leaning out of the
window of his apartment on the Strand to invite passers-by to parties he's throwing; and the members of the community of flirtatious, witty (and, in Jonson's eyes, contemptible) women known as the Collegiates make use of their own homes ‘in Town’ for clandestine assignations with their lovers. Urban space in Epicene is staged in terms of these leisurely applications of private homes and the motions between them.

Jonson rarely permits this kind of basic spatial patterning to remain separate in his comedies from his interest in critiquing the social pretensions and moral failings of urban life. Though everyone in Epicene uses the West End in structurally similar ways, and though a firm sense of social exclusivity is the result of this similarity, it becomes clear over the course of the play that while characters like Truewit have mastered urban space, others have been mastered by it. Jonson reserves his sharpest satire for two characters, Mistress Otter and Morose, who are dominated by the practical diversity of the city. Mistress Otter, a china-seller whose hopes for social advancement hinge on distancing herself from the de classé tastes of her husband, describes a dream (or perhaps a series of actual events – the wording is ambiguous) in which her clothes are repeatedly attacked by the city itself: her black satin gown is burned at a friend’s house; her starched collar covered in candle wax at a court masque; her red doublet ‘dash’d’ by a ‘brewer’s horse’ as she rides by in a coach (3.2.60–1). The mundane materials of urban space – emblems for the crass economic relations that taint Mistress Otter in the eyes of wealthier characters – degrade everything that touches them.

Morose, on the other hand, whose desire to disinherit his nephew Dauphine makes him the villain of the play, is castigated for his attempts to carve out a perfectly silent, isolated space for himself, a space somehow both inside of but detached from the aural landscape of the city as a whole. Ringing church bells, the cries of hawkers passing by on the street and the hubbub of ‘citations, appellations, allegations, certificates, attachments, intergatories, references, convictions, and afflictions’ that make up the scene at the law courts all horrify him (4.7.13–14). To protect himself, Morose creates a sonically hermetic room with ‘double walls and treble ceilings’ (1.1.146–7) and insists that his servants communicate through gestures, rather than through speech. Needless to say, his plan fails. If one of the fundamental jokes of Epicene is that there is no such thing as its eponymous silent woman, this joke is mirrored by the sense in the play that there can be no such thing as a silent space in the city. Morose’s sanctum is invaded first by the loquacious Truewit, then by a rowdy wedding party including his suddenly talkative wife, and by the end of the play he is
a defeated man, willingly participating in noisy debates over his own sexual and mental competence as he attempts to annul his marriage. Morose’s social failures are staged as spatial failures: isolation and separation are not a viable option in Jonson’s vision of the West End.¹⁰

Spatial particularity and pressures on the same are crucial features of two of Jonson’s other most famous comedies: The Alchemist, which takes place entirely in and around Lovewit’s house in the Blackfriars precinct (Jonson himself lived in the same neighbourhood around the time the play was written); and Bartholomew Fair, which, with the exception of the first act, is set in the Smithfield grounds of a yearly cloth market. Jonson’s interest in classical theories of art and drama are on display in both of these plays – their spatial compression helps them adhere to the Aristotelian unity of place in a way that few early modern English comedies ever did. They also provide the best evidence of Jonson’s ability to stage the ways in which urban space is shaped both by settled knowledge and by the competitive, shifting pressures of city life generated by economic need and common human desires. The simple spatial premise of The Alchemist is a case in point. Face, the servant of a wealthy gentleman who has left him behind to look after his home in London during a plague outbreak, joins forces with two grifters, Subtle and Dol; the three use Lovewit’s house as the setting for a number of interrelated scams. The unity of setting stands in sharp contrast to the multiple uses to which the house is put. False horoscopes are drawn up. Ludicrous magical formulae for keeping flies away from tobacco are spelled out. An impossible Queen of Fairies materializes for a literal shakedown. Sexual assignations are promised and postponed. And, of course, a complicated conglomeration of beakers, bellows and pipes is somewhere always on the verge of creating the Philosopher’s Stone for a client. The effect is one of intense urban density. A single house – and even a single room – draws together a tobacconist, a law clerk who thinks of himself as a rakish gambler, a wealthy gourmand, two Puritans and a naive rural arriviste bearing his sister on his arm. Each of them finds themselves caught in the vortex of their own desires for profit, for sex, for the power to transform iron into gold; each of them, in turn, hands over something of value for the privilege of being duped.

It is no accident that this house and its crowded room are located by Jonson in the Blackfriars neighbourhood, the liberty within the western wall of London that had once housed an order of monks but that had become by James’s reign a rather well-to-do neighbourhood famous for its feather-sellers, its concentration of skilled portrait painters and, of course, its indoor theater, soon to be, if not already, occupied by the King’s Men
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around the time The Alchemist was first performed. Like several other former and current ecclesiastical properties in and around the city, the Blackfriars area was known as a ‘liberty’ because it did not fall under the legal jurisdiction of London’s aldermanic establishment. More and less illicit forms of commerce – paying for plays, for example, but also prostitution and unregulated victualling or ale-selling – often found homes in London’s liberties. By placing Lovewit’s house in the midst of one, Jonson transforms a single dense space – a crowded room full of diverse people paying for the privilege of watching imaginary, pleasurable acts – into an analogue for the theater and for the city more generally. As the clamouring customers in The Alchemist struggle for their all-too-similar satisfactions, urban space and theatrical space reflect back upon one another, shimmering with comic energy: Jonson underscores the ways in which multiplicity and particularity collaborate to produce the spectacular social and economic exchanges of London life.

Jonson’s dramatic exploration of the dynamism of urban space reached a peak of sorts in 1614, when Bartholomew Fair was first performed at the Hope Theatre on the south bank of the Thames and then at Whitehall, before the court. Forgoing his sometimes oblique satire of the more mundane elements of consumption and exchange, Jonson takes us on a headlong tour of one of early modern London’s most famous market fairs. Since at least 1123, Bartholomew Fair had been held each August near the church of St Bartholomew in Smithfield. Though it was originally intended to serve as an annual opportunity for cloth merchants to display and sell their wares, by Jonson’s time the fair had become a celebration of lighter forms of commerce. Puppets, gingerbread babies, beer, pie and, of course, freshly roasted pigs drew entertainment-seekers from around the city who had little interest in the going rate for a yard of buckram. Jonson takes full advantage of the wide appeal of the space of the fair to stage once more the ways in which diverse city types can be drawn together by the promise of profit and pleasurable consumption. Rather than anchoring the narrative around a small group of controlling figures and a single room, Jonson sets his characters free to roam from booth to booth. As a result, a kind of socio-spatial expansiveness pervades Bartholomew Fair, despite its locational specificity. Accidental encounters in the loud crowd push the plot forward, while the play’s characters interact like ball-bearings in a pinball machine: always moving in seemingly random ways but eventually settling into unsurprising places. As Bartholomew Fair becomes Bartholomew Fair, Smithfield is staged as the matrix for a typically Jonsonian process of encounter and exchange, profit and punishment: the
play’s oaf, Bartholomew Cokes, is gulled of his wife-to-be and her dowry; the foolish Justice Overdo ends up locked in his own stocks; the witty gallants Quarlous and Winwife achieve the social and economic rewards associated with marriage. Urban space once more becomes comic space, a space of communal consolidation shot through with the ever-present possibility for degradation and loss.

There are any number of other plays and poems by Jonson that add nuance to this introduction to his encounters with urban space. The satirical poem ‘On the Famous Voyage’ describes a disgustingly odiferous trip by wherry along the sewage-filled Fleet ditch to Holborn. The Staple of News imagines the city as an interconnected set of nodal points and channels for the transmission of news and gossip. Even plays that are not set in London itself offer rich perspectives on the meanings and functions of urban space for Jonson: Sejanus contains a tableau of populist violence in the streets of Rome in which the play’s eponymous consul is torn to pieces by the city’s denizens; and Volpone imagines a world of Venetian balconies and squares where Volpone attempts to seduce Celia with a mountebank act performed below her window. But it seems fitting to end this discussion with Jonson’s most elaborate intervention in and reproduction of urban space itself: the triumphal arch he designed for the coronation procession of King James through London in 1604. The arch was topped with a model of the City’s skyline and supported by columns replete with a series of allegorical figures meant to represent the guiding spirits of London, ‘Bouleutes [. . .] the councell of the citie’; Polemius, ‘The warlike force of the citie’; and ‘Tamesis, the river’ among them. Jonson’s description of the arch reveals his affection for the city – realism and glorification, he suggests, are in some ways identical registers. In his own words, the arch ‘not onely labored the expression of state and magnificence (as proper to a triumphall Arch) but the very site, fabricke, strength, policie, dignitie, and affections of the Citie were all laid downe to life’ (sig. 4B4v) Jonson goes on to offer a critique of his project in terms that, with their emphasis on the aesthetics of urban communality, echo those of Mumford:

The nature and propertie of these Deuices being, to present alwaies some one entire bodie, or figure, consisting of distinct members, and each of those expressing it selfe, in the[ir] owne activte spher, yet all, with that generall harmonie so connexed, and disposed, as no one little part can be missing to the illustration of the whole. (sig. 4B4v)

We see here Jonson’s fantasy of an entirely unified representation of London, one that puts ‘distinct members’ in a series of spaces – each in
their ‘owne active spheare’ – so as to create a frame of formal harmony that could not exist without every one of those members. The whole of the city balances above a network of individual figures; the figures themselves lack purpose without the spatial arrangement produced by the city-topped arch. We could do worse than to understand Jonson’s engagements with urban space in terms of his own sense of the mutual relation between part and whole: each play, each poem, each snide or satirical epigram an individual figure; each one standing alone and acting in semantic collaboration with the others; each creating meaning for early modern London and for urban space more generally; and each in turn made meaningful and beautiful by our own experiences of city life, experiences that Jonson’s work continues to illuminate even to this day.

NOTES

2. For the sake of brevity, and in order to encompass the general scope of Jonson’s interest in urban space, I will use the words ‘city’ and ‘London’ in ways that would likely seem inaccurate to Jonson and his contemporaries. The City of London in Jonson’s day had discrete boundaries roughly (though not entirely) defined by the wards within and immediately bordering its medieval walls. Westminster was a separate corporate entity, and the areas to the north and west of London itself were administered not by the City’s Lord Mayor and the aldermanic courts but by Middlesex county justices and other crown authorities. That said, Jonson tended to integrate these different cities and outlying areas into facets of a larger social totality, and the term ‘urban space’ accurately identifies this totality as such. When I wish to refer to the precise administrative unit of early modern London, I will use the capitalized ‘City’. Otherwise, the terms ‘city’ and ‘London’ refer here to a broader area, including the parts of Middlesex that Jonson deals with his work.


6. Citation taken from Howes’ additions to John Stowe’s *Annales, or A Generall Chronicle of England* (London, 1615), 4D2r.


8. Thomas Freeman, *Rub, and a Great Cast* (London, 1614), B3r.


