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In Defense of the Marketplace: Spontaneous Order in Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair*

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*Dost thou think, because thou art virtuous, there shall be no
more cakes and ale?*

—Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*

I.

At first glance, Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* may seem to be the *Seinfeld* of the English Renaissance—the original show about nothing. One can imagine the befuddled looks Jonson got when he first pitched the concept to his theater company: “I’ve written a play about Bartholomew Fair—a bunch of people go to the fair, they mill around, and then they go home.” Compared to Jonson’s earlier comic masterpieces, *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*, *Bartholomew Fair* seems unfocused and diffuse.¹ The play

¹T.S. Eliot claimed that the play has “hardly a plot at all.” See his “Ben Jonson” in *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1950), p. 134. See also Richard Levin, *The Multiple Plot in English Renaissance Drama* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 202. In his Introduction to *English Renaissance Comedy* (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 1999), Alexander

just seems to exfoliate, with more and more characters introduced in scene after scene and more plots and counterplots hatched as the action unfolds. *Bartholomew Fair* lacks a pair of central characters around whom the play is organized and who appear to direct its action, such as Volpone and Mosca in *Volpone* or Face and Subtle in *The Alchemist*.² With a verbal exuberance unmatched outside of Shakespeare, the play is constantly threatening to veer off into irrelevance, incoherence, and even absurdity, as the characters get wrapped up in word games that fly in the face of normal dramatic logic. As Jonson's stage directions read at one point: "Here they continue their game of vapours, which is nonsense; every man to oppose the last man that spoke, whether it concerned him or no."³ Just as in *Seinfeld*, the characters often appear to be talking merely to fill the time and not because they have anything in particular to say.

But *Bartholomew Fair* only appears to be about nothing. Again like *Seinfeld*, the play tells us something about its characters by showing them engaged in so much meaningless dialogue. And its apparent formlessness and lack of a center reflect a deeper order and sense of form. By liberating the dialogue from the normal constraints of dramatic action, Jonson freed himself to put an unparalleled slice of Renaissance life on the stage. The play may be difficult to follow for the reader, but given a decent performance, it can be a brilliant theatrical success,⁴ as figure after figure comes to life on the stage, each characterized by a distinctive mode of speech and each given his or her moment in the spotlight to reveal a distinctive way of life. One has to turn to Chaucer, Shakespeare, or Dickens to find a comparable richness

Leggatt quotes Terry Hands, who, in connection with his 1969 production of the play for the Royal Shakespeare Company, described it as "an enormous canvas with no particular focus" (p. 138).

²See Levin, *Multiple Plot*, p. 208 and Eugene M. Waith, ed., *Ben Jonson, Bartholomew Fair* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 2.

³Act IV, scene iv, ll. 24ff. All quotations from *Bartholomew Fair* are taken from the edition of Gordon Campbell in Ben Jonson, *The Alchemist and Other Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

⁴See Campbell, *Alchemist*, p. xx.

in the kaleidoscopic portrayal of human life. What may at first seem to be a weakness of *Bartholomew Fair*—its lack of focus—turns out to be its great strength—its ability to embrace a wide variety of human types and develop them in their full diversity, without imposing any narrowing artistic or moral conceptions upon them. In that sense *Bartholomew Fair* strikingly anticipates modern drama, resembling at times Brecht, Pirandello, and even Beckett.⁵ Like Francis Beaumont's *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, *Bartholomew Fair* even seems at moments postmodern, with its theatrical self-consciousness and its genius in revealing how conventional drama is generated out of the fantasies of its audience.

Jonson's play is thus deeply paradoxical. Although calling attention to the dramatic medium itself, it at times creates the illusion of giving an unmediated glimpse into the lives of its characters. Although a highly artful play, it succeeds in concealing its artifice and may at first seem to be just thrown together on the stage like an improvisation.⁶ Although seemingly the most formless of Jonson's plays, it actually obeys the unities of time and place as strictly as any of his other works.⁷ In fact, it comes close to unfolding in real time on stage. Remarkably, in *Bartholomew Fair* Jonson found a way to remain within the bounds of his neoclassical conception of dramatic form, while still imparting a feeling of spontaneity to the play. In short, the play obeys Jonson's cherished law of the unities, while appearing to be wholly free and above or beyond any formal law.⁸

⁵On parallels to Beckett, see Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), p. 136.

⁶Martin Butler says that Jonson manages "to give an illusion of randomness which is carefully and rigorously premeditated." See his *The Selected Plays of Ben Jonson* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1989), vol. 2, p. 147.

⁷See Waith, *Bartholomew Fair*, p. 20.

⁸See Leggatt, *English Renaissance Comedy*, pp. 136–37, E.A. Horsman, ed., *Bartholomew Fair* (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 1960), p. xi, and Anne Barton, "Shakespeare and Jonson," in *Essays, Mainly Shakespearean* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 294: "[*Bartholomew Fair*] maintains the most delicate balance between order and chaos, between structure and a seemingly undisciplined flow which is like the random, haphazard nature of life itself."

The tension between law and spontaneity evident in the form of *Bartholomew Fair* turns out to be at work in the content as well. In recreating Bartholomew Fair on the stage, the play offers a remarkable portrait of one of the great marketplaces of Renaissance London.⁹ Throughout his career, Jonson was fascinated by the emerging market economy in Renaissance Europe. He was intrigued by the new categories of human identity the market was creating (the roles of merchants, bankers, financiers, and entrepreneurs) and he was evidently troubled by the new forms of corruption and vice endemic to proto-capitalist life. *Bartholomew Fair* gave Jonson a chance to anatomize the lawlessness of the marketplace. Through the comments of his Puritan characters, Jonson shows how the fair violates religious law, and he uses Adam Overdo, a Justice of the Peace, to rail against the ways the merchants continually violate the criminal law as well. As Jonson presents it, *Bartholomew Fair* is the original home and headquarters of all the charlatans, cheaters, and thieves in London.

And yet, for all his criticism of the marketplace in *Bartholomew Fair*, Jonson ends up being more critical of its critics.¹⁰ From the standpoint of traditional religion and politics, the market may look lawless, but Jonson explores the possibility that it may obey laws of its own. In a remarkable anticipation of later

⁹For information on the actual Bartholomew Fair and Renaissance fairs in general, see Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986), especially chapter 1. Stallybrass and White correctly emphasize the modernity of the fair and its role as a harbinger of developing market principles, and they criticize a nostalgic view of the fair as a backward-looking medieval institution. For the role of fairs in the developing market economy of the Renaissance, see Jean-Christophe Agnew, *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1550–1750* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 17–56, and especially for Bartholomew Fair, p. 47. For more general discussions of the new commercial developments in the Renaissance, see Fernand Braudel, *Capitalism and Material Life, 1400–1800*, Miriam Kochan, trans. (New York: Harper & Row, 1973) and Lisa Jardine, *Worldly Goods: A New History of the Renaissance* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996).

¹⁰See Waith, *Bartholomew Fair*, p. 3 and William W.E. Slights, *Ben Jonson and the Art of Secrecy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), pp. 149, 152, 211, n. 34.

economic theory, he appears to sense that the market may be a self-regulating mechanism, capable of bringing peace to a society that seems otherwise to be tearing itself apart in religious and political conflicts.¹¹ The characters who stand up for religious and political principles in *Bartholomew Fair* turn out to be the divisive forces in the play, while the seemingly lawless participants in the fair work to bring about a kind of civil harmony, based on the satisfaction of fundamental economic needs and natural human desires. Jonson exposes all the faults of an unregulated marketplace, but he more profoundly subjects its would-be regulators to a withering critique. He reveals their self-interested motives for wanting to regulate the fair and, more importantly, he lays bare

¹¹Nearly a year and a half after writing the first draft of this essay, I discovered that its central claim had already been advanced by Jean-Christophe Agnew, who writes of *Bartholomew Fair* in his *Worlds Apart*, pp. 120–21:

There are plenty of plots in the play but no plot to it; no one, villainous or virtuous, appears to be in charge. . . . [T]he fair itself is the engine that precipitates the action of the play . . . Jonson's market operates, in effect, as an "invisible hand," diverting private vices to the public benefit. . . . [T]he forms and conventions that Jonson introduced to achieve his dramatic purposes in the play do adumbrate the solutions that Adam Smith would later propose to those who feared the divisive social consequences of unrestricted competition. Like *The Wealth of Nations*, *Bartholomew Fair* imagined the market as a power capable of generating its own legitimacy through a negotiated process of mutual authorization. By making the fair itself the occasion of countless private calculations and, at the same time, the vehicle of their ultimate public reconciliation, Jonson was taking a step, however tentative, toward a functionalist legitimation of a free and placeless market.

I thank my colleague Katharine Eisaman Maus for calling my attention to this passage and for other help with this essay. My analysis may be regarded as a working out in detail of Agnew's original insight, although, for what it is worth, I did arrive at the point independently, and my use of Austrian economics, rather than Marxist, to analyze Jonson's view of the market leads me to emphasize different aspects of the play.

their sheer incompetence to manage the marketplace successfully.

In contrast to what happens in Jonson's earlier masterpieces, *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*, in *Bartholomew Fair* the apparent forces of disorder triumph at the end and frustrate the efforts of those who try to impose order on their economic activities.¹² As grave as Jonson's doubts about an unregulated market may be, in the end he seems to suggest that a regulated market would be a good deal worse, if only because the regulators are no better than the regulated. For all its faults, the market in Jonson's portrayal answers to deep-seated needs in human nature and he ultimately seems to recognize the value of the freedom it offers, as well as the fact that freedom is compatible with its own kind of order. In short, Jonson seems to have an inkling of the idea of spontaneous order as it was to be developed in the twentieth century by the Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek.¹³ *Bartholomew Fair* offers an example in miniature of a community that is ordered, not by regulations imposed by an outside authority, but by self-regulating principles generated from within, a system of checks and balances that relies on the common material interests of its participants to bring about their harmony. *Bartholomew Fair* may be the first portrait in literary history of how a free market operates.

If Jonson displays unusual sympathy for the nascent free markets of the Renaissance in *Bartholomew Fair*, the reason may be that he recognized that as a professional dramatist and actor he was a participant in a marketplace himself. *Bartholomew Fair* is the headquarters of charlatans and thieves, but it is also the home of playwrights and actors, and the two groups are not unrelated in Jonson's portrayal. The play culminates in a puppet

¹²See Stallybrass and White, *Transgression*, p. 66, Jonas Barish, *Ben Jonson and the Language of Prose Comedy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), pp. 212–13, and Katharine Eisaman Maus, *Ben Jonson and the Roman Frame of Mind* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 132.

¹³For a concise statement of the theory of spontaneous order, see Hayek's essay "The Results of Human Action but not of Human Design" in his *Studies in Philosophy, Politics and Economics* (New York: Clarion, 1969), pp. 96–105.

show, which seems to stand for the world of drama in general and embodies all that is best and worst in the fair. It reflects everything that is economically unscrupulous in the fair's business practices, and yet it brings a genuine joy to the customers who seek it out. Jonson seems to have come to realize that if marketplaces are regulated, the theater will always be among the first to come under government control and the results will not always be beneficial to the theater and its public.¹⁴ As he shows, particularly in his Puritan characters, Jonson understood that critics of the marketplace inevitably become critics of the theater as an especially conspicuous example of market principles. In *Bartholomew Fair* Jonson seems to allow his professional commitment to the theater to overcome the contempt for the world of commerce he shared with many of his aristocratic patrons. He even seems to have tried to shape a new dramatic form in *Bartholomew Fair* that would mirror the freedom and spontaneity of the marketplace it represents. The apparent formlessness of the play actually answers to an inner law—the spontaneous order of the free market—and its artful artlessness suggests in aesthetic terms how the principles of order and freedom can be reconciled.¹⁵

II.

At first sight, *Bartholomew Fair* seems to carry on the critique of the nascent market economy of the Renaissance Jonson had developed in earlier plays such as *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*. Like many of his contemporaries, Jonson was particularly disturbed by the way his society was moving from a conception of wealth based on land to one based on money. In *Volpone*, he satirizes the way money begets money in the devious schemes of Volpone and Mosca, who appear to be utterly unproductive and

¹⁴For examples of government regulation during the Elizabethan period that proved disastrous to the theater companies and to Jonson in particular, see David Riggs, *Ben Jonson: A Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 33–34.

¹⁵For the structural pattern of *Bartholomew Fair*, see Levin, *Multiple Plot*, pp. 211–12.

living like parasites off the wealth of others. In *The Alchemist*, Jonson images the world of trade and finance as a giant con game, in which greedy and ambitious men on the make are seduced into a variety of get-rich-quick schemes by the charlatans Face and Subtle. To Jonson, the act of market exchange looks like alchemy, the fraudulent promise to create value out of nothing, to change something worthless into something precious, as the alchemists claimed to transmute base metals into gold.

Jonson is thus a good illustration of Hayek's claim that the market economy looks like magic to people who do not understand the complexities of economic transactions. Many fail to recognize the genuine contributions entrepreneurs make to economic life by their ability to ferret out knowledge of market conditions and their willingness to take risks; these people thus picture the businessman as a kind of sorcerer. As Hayek writes:

Such distrust and fear have, since antiquity and in many parts of the world, led ordinary people as well as socialist thinkers to regard trade not only as distinct from material production, not only as chaotic and superfluous in itself, . . . but also as suspicious, inferior, dishonest, and contemptible. . . . Activities that appear to add to available wealth, "out of nothing," without physical creation and by merely rearranging what already exists, stink of sorcery. . . . That a mere change of hands should lead to a gain in value to all participants, that it need not mean gain to one at the expense of the others (or what has come to be called exploitation), was and is nonetheless intuitively difficult to grasp. . . . As a consequence of all these circumstances, many people continue to find the mental feats associated with trade easy to discount even when they do not attribute them to sorcery, or see them as depending on trick or fraud or cunning deceit.¹⁶

As Hayek points out, this kind of distrust of the businessman is particularly acute early in economic history. For example, during

¹⁶Friedrich Hayek, *The Fatal Conceit: The Errors of Socialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 90, 91, 93. For similar thoughts on how the new market economy was imaged in terms of sorcery, see Agnew, *Worlds Apart*, pp. 57–59, 70–72.

the Renaissance, when capitalist principles were beginning to dissolve medieval ways of doing business, many people were confused and alienated by the initial results.¹⁷

Jonson seems to have spent much of his career in reaction to and rebellion against what can be described as his lower middle-class origins.¹⁸ His stepfather was a bricklayer, and by following in his footsteps, Jonson was exposed early in his life to the world of trade. Fortunately he received an excellent education at the famous Westminster School in London, and pursued the typical middle-class path of rising in society by using his wits and learning.¹⁹ Probably in 1594, he entered the world of the professional theater, first as an actor and then as a playwright. The theater was one of the more advanced segments of the Elizabethan economy, employing financial and marketing techniques that were sophisticated for the time (for example, the theaters were early examples of joint-stock companies and were heavily capitalized by Renaissance standards). As the cases of Marlowe and Shakespeare had already shown, the Elizabethan theater offered a marvelous opportunity for a talented young man to make money and a name for himself.²⁰

Although Jonson prospered in the theater world, he seems to have resented the source of his income and success. He repeatedly shows signs of believing that the conditions of the commercial theaters forced him to compromise his art to please the

¹⁷I do not have the space to deal with the vexed question of exactly when capitalism “began.” Arguments have been made that certain basic principles of the market economy can already be observed in the medieval period. See, for example, Henri Pirenne, *Medieval Cities: Their Origins and the Revival of Trade*, Frank D. Halsey, trans. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1952) and Robert S. Lopez, *The Commercial Revolution of the Middle Ages, 950–1350* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1976). See also Agnew, *Worlds Apart*, pp. 27–28, 44. But however “proto-capitalist” the Middle Ages may have been, England was clearly entering upon a new phase of economic life in Jonson’s day and he and his contemporaries had trouble coming to terms with these radical changes.

¹⁸This is one of the main themes of David Riggs’s biography of Jonson; see especially *Jonson*, pp. 4–5.

¹⁹On Jonson’s ambition, see Riggs, *Jonson*, pp. 2–3.

²⁰See Riggs, *Jonson*, pp. 24–25.

debased taste of the public. He made fun of the way other playwrights (including Shakespeare) catered to their audience and he often got embroiled in controversy as a result. He sought to purge the theater of what he perceived to be its vulgarity, conceiving of himself as the playwright who would restore classical dignity to drama, in part by consciously imitating Roman models in many of his plays. Jonson was the first English playwright to bring out a published edition of his plays (in 1616), no doubt with a view to proving that his works were not the mere ephemeral products of the entertainment marketplace but literature of lasting value.²¹

Throughout his literary career, Jonson did everything he could to escape the commercial theater world, above all turning to aristocratic and royal patronage as an alternative to his bourgeois source of income in the entertainment business. He wrote poetry in quest of aristocratic patrons and even in his dramatic career, he alternated between writing for the public theaters and writing for the royal court.²² He was the great master of the court masque, and was richly rewarded over the years by James I for his contribution to royal entertainments. Aside from the financial advantages of writing for the court, Jonson seems to have been attracted by the prospect of composing with aristocratic taste in mind, rather than the lower- and middle-class taste that prevailed in the commercial theaters. The stage history of *Bartholomew Fair* encapsulates Jonson's theatrical career in miniature. The play was first staged on October 31, 1614 at one of the public theaters, the Hope, and the following evening it

²¹On Jonson's motives for bringing out the 1616 Folio, see Barish, *Antitheatrical Prejudice*, p. 138, Leggatt, *English Renaissance Comedy*, p. 135, and Stallybras and White, *Transgression*, p. 75.

²²For the tension running throughout Jonson's theatrical career, see Riggs, *Jonson*, pp. 63–64, 69, 234, Stallybras and White, *Transgression*, pp. 66–79, Barish, *Antitheatrical Prejudice*, pp. 132–54, and Kate McLuskie, "Making and Buying: Ben Jonson and the Commercial Theater Audience," in Julie Sanders, Kate Chedgzoy, and Susan Wiseman, eds., *Refashioning Ben Jonson: Gender, Politics and the Jonsonian Canon* (London: Macmillan, 1998), pp. 134–54.

was performed at court before James I.²³ In the published version of the play, both the prologue and the epilogue are addressed to James, and Jonson shamelessly flatters the king for having taste superior to the mob's. In this one play, Jonson for once seems to have it both ways.²⁴ He gives his popular audience the kind of vulgar spectacle it craves and then he repackages the same material for a court audience, presenting it in a condescending fashion and implying that he and his aristocratic patrons are above this sort of foolery.²⁵

Bartholomew Fair thus seems to embody everything that was conservative and backward-looking in Jonson's drama. He apparently sides with the aristocracy and its world of feudal privilege against the rising middle class and its world of money and commerce.²⁶ For critics with socialist leanings, it is tempting

²³See Waith, *Bartholomew Fair*, p. 205, Butler, *Selected Plays*, p. 148, Leggatt, *English Renaissance Comedy*, p. 136, and Campbell, *Alchemist*, p. 503. As these editors point out, a measure of the "popularity" of the Hope Theater is the fact that it was still being used for the "sport" of bear-baiting. In *The Politics of Mirth* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 43–44, Leah Marcus offers an interesting discussion of bear-baiting in connection with *Bartholomew Fair*; she points out that Ursula (the "little bear") is baited several times in the course of the action.

²⁴See Horsman, *Bartholomew Fair*, pp. xii–xiv, Butler, *Selected Plays*, p. 149, and Julie Sanders, *Ben Jonson's Theatrical Republics* (London: Macmillan, 1998), pp. 92–93.

²⁵See McLuskie, "Making and Buying," pp. 144–45.

²⁶This was L.C. Knights's view of Jonson and his "fellows" in his famous book, *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1937). See especially p. 7: "The standards of judgement that they brought to bear were not formed in that new world of industrial enterprise. They belonged to an older world which was still 'normal,' a world of small communities." Knights's view of Jonson is effectively countered by Don E. Wayne in his essay "Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson: An Alternative View," *Renaissance Drama* 13 (1982): 103–29. Wayne points out that Knights's view of Jonson as reactionary depends crucially on the fact that he omits *Bartholomew Fair* from his discussion (p. 104). Wayne goes on to show how Knights's interpretation itself rests on a kind of academic nostalgia (pp. 127–29). Wayne concludes: "despite his classicism and traditionalism, Jonson looked ahead as much as he did backward in time" (p. 129).

to read *Bartholomew Fair* as a proto-Brechtian work, as if Jonson were criticizing the early signs of capitalism from the left.²⁷ But insofar as the play satirizes the commercial world, it does so from the right. One must remember that even (and especially) in Marxist terms, capitalism was the progressive force in Jonson's day, since it was working to dissolve centuries of antiquated feudal privilege and unleash unprecedentedly productive forces. At first glance, Jonson's view of capitalism in *Bartholomew Fair* thus seems reactionary. Turning his back on his own class origins, and scorning the original source of his theatrical success, he identifies with an aristocracy we now know to have been in decline. *Bartholomew Fair* shows how chaotic and morally dubious the new world of trade and money looked to the old order it was displacing. In Jonson's portrait, the marketplace is basically a den of thieves, and flouts all conventional notions of morality, decency, and fair play. One character, Ezekiel Edgworth, is a professional cutpurse, but Jonson does not present him as the only criminal among a group of honest tradespeople. On the contrary, almost all the fair merchants are directly implicated in the activities of thieves like Edgworth, leading the young fool in the play, Bartholomew Cokes, to conclude: "Would I might . . . never stir, if I think there be anything but thievery and cozening i' this whole Fair."²⁸ The seemingly honest merchants at the fair work hand in hand with Edgworth, identifying victims for him, setting them up for the actual robberies, and helping him to dispose of the stolen goods.

Even when the merchants of *Bartholomew Fair* are not participating in outright thievery, Jonson presents them as looking to cheat their customers. He makes the familiar charge that the merchants adulterate their products to increase their profits.²⁹

²⁷See Jonathan Haynes, *The Social Relations of Jonson's Theater* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 135; he calls *Bartholomew Fair* "this most Brechtian of Renaissance plays."

²⁸*Bartholomew Fair*, IV.ii.61–63.

²⁹See Haynes, *Social Relations*, p. 123, and for a discussion of adulteration as the central theme in *Bartholomew Fair*, see Douglas Bruster, *Drama and the Market in the Age of Shakespeare* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 90–95.

Jonson's tradespeople themselves accuse each other of lacking business ethics. When one merchant tries to encroach on another's territory, they clash. Leatherhead the hobby-horse seller threatens the gingerbread woman Joan Trash: "Sit farther with your gingerbread-progeny there, and hinder not the prospect of my shop, or I'll ha' it proclaimed in the Fair what stuff they are made on."³⁰ When Joan protests: "What stuff are they made on. . . ? Nothing but what's wholesome, I assure you," Leatherhead begins to betray her trade secrets: "Yes, stale bread, rotten eggs, musty ginger and dead honey."³¹ But the prize for adulteration at the fair goes to Ursula the pig-woman, who also does a thriving business in alcohol and tobacco on the side, and instructs her assistant Mooncalf on how to stretch their supplies and increase their sales:

But look to't, sirrah, you were best; threepence a pipeful I will ha' made of all my whole pound of tobacco, and a quarter of a pound of coltsfoot mixed with it too, to eke it out. . . . Then six and twenty shillings a barrel I will advance o' my beer, and fifty shillings a hundred o' my bottle-ale; I ha' told you the ways how to raise it. Froth your cans well in the filling, at length, rogue, and jog your bottles o' the buttock, sirrah, then skink out the first glass, ever, and drink with all companies, though you be sure to be drunk; you'll misreckon the better, and be less ashamed on't. But your true trick, rascal, must be to be ever busy, and mis-take away the bottles and cans in haste before they be half drunk off, and never hear anybody call (if they should chance to mark you) till you ha' brought fresh, and be able to forswear 'em.³²

The density of detail in this passage suggests that Jonson was uncannily familiar with the dark side of Renaissance commerce.

But Jonson is not interested only in aberrations of the market principle, moments when unscrupulous individuals depart from

³⁰*Bartholomew Fair*, II.ii.3-5.

³¹*Ibid.*, II.ii.6-9.

³²*Ibid.*, II.ii.86-99.

the decent norms of business. His satire goes right to the heart of the market principle itself. He is extremely skeptical about the way products are merchandised, and displays a surprisingly sophisticated understanding of how tradespeople are able to prey upon the desires of potential customers. Jonson's portrait of the fair suggests a world that has gone mad with consumerism, and Cokes is the maddest of them all, Jonson's image of everything that can go wrong when a market liberates the desires of its customers.³³ He is particularly struck by the power of what we would call advertising, which was no doubt still at a primitive stage in his day but was already able to exert its power over consumers. Jonson shows the customers at the fair continuously bombarded by the din of the merchants hawking their wares: "What do you lack? What is't you buy? What do you lack? Rattles, drums, halberts, horses, babies o' the best? Fiddles of the finest?"³⁴

Cokes's tutor, Humphrey Wasp, describes him as mesmerized by the power of advertising—the many signs displayed at the fair.³⁵ As a result of being bombarded with advertising, Cokes has his desires awakened and he cannot control his appetites.³⁶ In Cokes, Jonson creates an unforgettable portrait of the helpless consumer, caught in the webs of advertising and overwhelmed by the wealth of goods now available in the Renaissance marketplace:

And the three Jew's trumps; and half a dozen o' birds,
and that drum (I have one drum already) and your
smiths (I like that device o' your smiths very pretty
well) and four halberts—and (le'me see) that fine
painted great lady, and her three women for state, I'll
have.³⁷

³³On the stimulation of desire in Renaissance fairs, see Stallybrass and White, *Transgression*, pp. 38–40. For Jonson's negative attitude toward consumer desires, see Bruster, *Drama and the Market*, p. 41.

³⁴*Bartholomew Fair*, II.ii.28–32.

³⁵*Ibid.*, I.iv.102–06.

³⁶*Ibid.*, I.v.100–06.

³⁷*Ibid.*, III.iv.67–71.

Wasp sees the logical conclusion of Cokes's infinite desire: "No, the shop; buy the whole shop, it will be best, the shop, the shop!"³⁸ Cokes finally asks one merchant: "What's the price, at a word, o' thy whole shop, case and all, as it stands."³⁹ Without skipping a beat, Leatherhead calculates the sum: "Sir, it stands me in six and twenty shillings sevenpence halfpenny, besides three shillings for my ground."⁴⁰ Here is the new world of capitalism in a nutshell—everything has its price in money and everything is up for sale. To emphasize the point, Jonson makes prostitution an integral part of the fair, and shows how easily decent women are drawn into the world of pimps and whores. By the time Jonson is through, it is difficult to distinguish the business of the fair in general from the business of prostitution. He presents the marketplace as a deeply confused and confusing realm, a topsy-turvy world in which moral values are inverted and characters lose their bearings. Cokes ends up completely bewildered and disoriented by his experience at the fair: "By this light, I cannot find my gingerbread-wife nor my hobby-horse man in all the Fair, now, to ha' my money again. And I do not know the way out on't, to go home for more. . . . Dost thou know where I dwell?"⁴¹ Assaulted from all sides by thieves, charlatans, and advertisers, Cokes utterly loses his sense of identity: "Friend, do you know who I am?"⁴²

III.

Jonson develops a strong case against the market in *Bartholomew Fair*. He shows the amorality, venality, lawlessness, and even the criminality of the unregulated marketplace, thus portraying a world that seems to cry out for some form of economic regulation. And he includes in the play characters who vehemently condemn the fair and call for its regulation. But for once Jonson

³⁸Ibid., III.iv.72-73.

³⁹Ibid., III.iv.129-30.

⁴⁰Ibid., III.iv.131-32.

⁴¹Ibid., IV.ii.20-22, 25.

⁴²Ibid., IV.ii.71.

asks the follow-up question: are these would-be regulators fit to impose law and order on the sprawling marketplace they profess to despise? This is not a trivial question, and just by posing it, Jonson takes a significant step toward arguments that eventually were to be developed by economists such as Adam Smith in favor of free markets. The fact that an unregulated market may have its faults and disadvantages does not in itself prove that a regulated market will be any better. It may have its own faults and disadvantages, and perhaps end up producing an even worse situation. In *Bartholomew Fair* Jonson finally gets around to scrutinizing the proponents of law and order to see if they really are capable of living up to their promise of improving the world.

The simplest case Jonson examines is Humphrey Wasp, who is devoted to restraining the appetites of his charge Cokes. Given how freely young Bartholomew spends his money, one can sympathize with Humphrey's attempts to be strict with him. But Wasp responds to Cokes's excesses with moral indignation. As his name indicates, Humphrey is waspish, always ready to fly off into fits of anger and quarrel with anyone in sight. It is thus by no means clear that his disposition is preferable to Cokes's or any less passionate and excessive. Bartholomew is a fool but he is a relatively harmless fool, and unlikely to cause much trouble for others. By contrast, Wasp is always provoking conflict and getting himself and others into difficulties. Other characters, such as John Littlewit, feel compelled to caution him: "Be civil, Master Numps."⁴³ His reply is not promising: "Why, say I have a humour not to be civil; how then? Who shall compel me?"⁴⁴ Incivility seems to be fundamental to Wasp's character; his indignation makes it difficult for him to get along with other people. Mistress Overdo views him as an enemy of the "conservation of the peace,"⁴⁵ eventually pleading with him: "govern your passions."⁴⁶ Here is the irony of Wasp's role in the play: he sets himself up as the governor of his charge's passions, and yet he cannot govern

⁴³Ibid., I.iv.53.

⁴⁴Ibid., I.iv.54-55.

⁴⁵Ibid., I.v.12.

⁴⁶Ibid., I.v.21.

his own. He presents himself as the champion of law and order, and yet he is in fact one of the chief forces for disorder in the play.

The game of “vapours” that breaks out in Act IV is very funny and borders on absurdity, but it may reflect a serious threat Jonson sensed in his world. In his image of people contradicting each other merely for the sake of contradicting each other, Jonson offers a comic reflection of Elizabethan and Jacobean society—a community riven by all sorts of competing claims and authorities, political and religious. With the benefit of historical hindsight, we can read *Bartholomew Fair* today and see the forces at work in the London of the play that were in a few decades to plunge Britain into civil war. But Jonson himself evidently saw the Puritan Revolution coming, or at least had an inkling of what might spark it. As the game of vapours gets out of hand and starts to become dangerous, Mistress Overdo once again tries to rein in Wasp and his quarrelsome companions: “conserve the peace.”⁴⁷ She sees the direction in which his waspishness is leading him: “Are you rebels? Gentlemen? Shall I send out a sergeant-at-arms or a writ o’ rebellion against you?”⁴⁸ The threat of revolution seems to be hovering in the background of *Bartholomew Fair*, and Jonson traces it not to the childish appetites of a Bartholomew Cokes but to the fiery indignation of a Humphrey Wasp.

In fact, the only way to contain Wasp’s rebellious anger turns out to be to place him in the stocks. In another ironic twist, the would-be restrainer ends up in restraint. The irony is not lost even on the dim-witted Bartholomew; learning of his tutor’s disgrace, Cokes is no longer disposed to honor his authority: “Hold your peace, Numps; you ha’ been i’ the stocks, I hear.”⁴⁹ Wasp immediately recognizes the implications for his continued rule over his charge: “Does he know that? Nay, then the date of my authority is out; I must think no longer to reign, my government is at an end. He that will correct another must want fault in him-

⁴⁷Ibid., IV.iv.101.

⁴⁸Ibid., IV.iv.128–29.

⁴⁹Ibid., V.iv.88.

self.”⁵⁰ Wasp’s last statement may represent Jonson’s great discovery in the course of writing *Bartholomew Fair*.⁵¹ The principle that only a superior, indeed a perfect, person has the right to regulate others does not apply just to Wasp in the play. In fact it is the governing principle of Jonson’s critique of all the would-be forces of law and order in the play, and especially of Zeal-of-the-Land Busy.⁵²

IV.

The fact that a fanatical Puritan is one of the chief critics of the marketplace in *Bartholomew Fair* is a good indication that Jonson may be reconsidering his earlier attacks on the new economic freedom of his era.⁵³ Jonson’s portrayal of Busy makes it clear that arguments against free markets are often ultimately based in religion, not economics. Busy’s objections to advertising and to the products displayed at the fair are rooted in his Puritanism and specifically his hatred of idolatry:

For long hair, it is an ensign of pride, a banner, and the world is full of those banners, very full of banners. And bottle-ale is a drink of Satan’s, a diet-drink of

⁵⁰Ibid., V.iv.90–91.

⁵¹This point is reinforced by the fact that the Wasp-Cokes story in *Bartholomew Fair* may reflect events that actually happened when Jonson accompanied Sir Walter Raleigh’s son Wat as his tutor on a trip to Paris. See Riggs, Jonson, pp. 206–7, Barish, *Prose Comedy*, p. 213, and Butler, *Selected Plays*, p. 137: “during this trip the pupil triumphantly exposed his mentor to public view in a cart while he was prostrated in a bout of drunkenness.” See also Luke Wilson, *Theaters of Intention: Drama and the Law in Early Modern England* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000), pp. 226, 314, n. 25.

⁵²On the parallels between Wasp and Busy, see Levin, *Multiple Plot*, pp. 204–5.

⁵³Riggs (*Jonson*, p. 195) suggests that in creating the character of Zeal-of-the-Land Busy, Jonson may have had a personal score to settle with a particular Puritan preacher named Robert Milles. Marcus (*Politics of Mirth*, p. 28) points out that *Bartholomew Fair* appeared during a period of “a fierce concentration of anti-Puritan rhetoric in performances at court, including the revival of works like Ben Jonson’s *Alchemist*.”

Satan's, devised to puff us up and make us swell in this latter age of vanity, as the smoke of tobacco to keep us in mist and error. But the fleshly woman which you call Ursula is above all to be avoided, having the marks upon her of the three enemies of man: the world, as being in the Fair; the devil, as being in the fire; and the flesh, as being herself.⁵⁴

Busy is convinced that the economic activity at the fair is not merely disordered and unregulated; it is sinful and evil. For him the fair is "wicked and foul" and "fitter may it be called a foul than a Fair."⁵⁵ He claims to know what is good for his fellow human beings and what is bad for them. Indeed, he thinks he knows better than they themselves what is in their interest. Thus, he arrogates to himself the right to tell people what they can and cannot do in the marketplace. Jonson himself had a strong streak of moralism and in many of his plays he sets himself up as the arbiter of good and evil. But his creation of the character of Busy seems to reflect a growing doubt about the social consequences of moralistic attitudes.

Busy is a busy-body, constantly meddling in other people's affairs and trying to reorder their lives. He criticizes pride but he is exceedingly proud himself, and enjoys lording it over others. It surely was not lost on Jonson that it was people like Busy who were attacking the London theaters and constantly trying to shut them down. As we will see, for Jonson the most objectionable aspect of Busy's moralism is his crusade against the theater, but the playwright seems to be aware that this campaign grows out of a more general hostility to the marketplace. Anyone who condemns attempts to please consumers is eventually going to get around to condemning the theater. In short, if the Puritans were enemies of the marketplace, Jonson may have begun to wonder if the marketplace was his ally. As Jonson sets up the terms of *Bartholomew Fair*, economic freedom is pitted against religious tyranny. When Busy starts overthrowing the stalls in the fair, John Littlewit and others contrive to have him arrested and

⁵⁴*Bartholomew Fair*, III.vi.27-35.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, III.vi.79-80.

placed in the stocks for disturbing the peace. Littlewit views this victory as the triumph of freedom: “Was not this shilling well ventured, Win, for our liberty? Now we may go play, and see over the Fair, where we list, ourselves.”⁵⁶

Jonson portrays Busy as an overreacher, a man who sets himself up as a god over his fellow human beings and fails to live up to his inflated self-image. But he also shows that Busy is a hypocrite. He condemns the money-making activities of the marketplace and yet he is obsessed with money-making himself.⁵⁷ In general, as if he were anticipating Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Jonson shows the Puritans devoting themselves quasi-religiously to the acquisition of wealth. In the fifth act, Dame Purecraft finally reveals that she is “worth six thousand pound”⁵⁸ — a huge sum in those days — and she goes on to explain the devious means by which she accumulated the money:⁵⁹

These seven years I have been a willful holy widow, only to draw feasts and gifts from my entangled suitors. I am also by office an assisting sister of the deacons, and a devourer, instead of a distributor, of the alms. I am a special maker of marriages for our decayed brethren with rich widows, for a third part of their wealth, when they are married, for the relief of the poor elect; as also our poor handsome young virgins with our wealthy bachelors or widowers to make them steal from their husbands when I have confirmed them in the faith, and got all put into their custodies.⁶⁰

Here the Puritan Dame Purecraft begins to sound a good deal like one of Jonson’s conmen in his earlier plays.

But Purecraft defers to Busy as the chief money-maker of them all. In his scheming to exploit legacies, he sounds even

⁵⁶Ibid., III.vi.104–06.

⁵⁷See Slights, *Art of Secrecy*, p. 158.

⁵⁸*Bartholomew Fair*, V.ii.46.

⁵⁹See Slights, *Art of Secrecy*, p. 159.

⁶⁰*Bartholomew Fair*, V.ii.48–57.

more like Volpone: "Our elder, Zeal-of-the-Land, would have had me, but I know him to be the capital knave of the land, making himself rich by being made feoffee in trust to deceased brethren, and cozening their heirs by swearing the absolute gift of their inheritance."⁶¹ Jonson gives Busy mercantile origins; the fact that he began as a baker⁶² stresses his kinship to the tradespeople he later condemns. Toward the end of the play, in Busy's debate at the puppet show, the Puppet Dionysius points out that the Puritans are heavily involved in the clothing trade and thus implicated in the very luxuries they rail against.⁶³

Jonson further shows that Busy is willing to bend the law to suit his own purposes.⁶⁴ Despite their claim to adhere strictly to religious law, the Puritans turn out to be extremely flexible when it comes to interpreting the law in accord with their own desires. When Win Littlewit expresses her deep longing for roast pig at the fair, her mother at first urges her to resist the temptation, but she soon is willing to endorse the desire "if it can be any way made or found lawful."⁶⁵ Dame Purecraft enlists her spiritual advisor Busy to find a way of pronouncing Win's appetite lawful. Busy sets to work interpreting the law, but it is a difficult case:

Verily, for the disease of longing, it is a disease, a carnal disease, or appetite, incident to women; and as it is carnal, and incident, it is natural, very natural. Now pig, it is a meat, and a meat that is nourishing, and may be longed for, and so consequently eaten; it may be eaten; very exceeding well eaten. But in the Fair, and as a Bartholomew pig, it cannot be eaten, for the very calling it a Bartholomew pig, and to eat it so, is a spice of idolatry.⁶⁶

⁶¹Ibid., V.ii.59–63.

⁶²Ibid., I.iii.107–12.

⁶³Ibid., V.v.75–84. See Leggatt, *English Renaissance Comedy*, p. 139.

⁶⁴See Slights, *Art of Secrecy*, pp. 157–58.

⁶⁵*Bartholomew Fair*, I.vi.27–28.

⁶⁶Ibid., I.vi.43–49.

Purecraft urges a liberal understanding of the law on her fellow Puritan: “Good Brother Zeal-of-the-Land, think to make it as lawful as you can.”⁶⁷ Busy proves equal to the task: “It may be eaten, and in the Fair, I take it, in a booth, the tents of the wicked. The place is not much, not very much, we may be religious in midst of the profane, so it be eaten with a reformed mouth, with sobriety, and humbleness; not gorged in with gluttony or greediness.”⁶⁸ Busy even finds a way to justify his own indulgence in eating pig at the fair:

In the way of comfort to the weak, I will go and eat. I will eat exceedingly, and prophesy; there may be a good use made of it, too, now I think on't: by the public eating of swine's flesh, to profess our hate and loathing of Judaism, whereof the brethren stand taxed. I will therefore eat, yea, I will eat exceedingly.⁶⁹

The ease with which Busy is able to interpret the law to permit him to do whatever he desires raises doubts about the status of law in the play. The advocates of the law present it as the moral alternative to the marketplace. The law is supposed to be immutable and incorruptible, as opposed to the mutable and corrupt marketplace, where everyone is on the make and values and prices change from minute to minute. But Jonson shows the Puritan characters making and remaking the law before our eyes. The law loses much of its prestige when it is revealed to be changeable and even pervertible according to the dictates of desire. In the puppet show debate, lawfulness turns out to be a matter of semantics, the product of mere wordplay and not of any fundamental principle. The puppet has an easy answer to Busy's charge that the theater lacks lawfulness:

BUSY: I mean no vocation, idol, no present lawful calling.
PUPPET DIONYSIUS: *Is yours a lawful calling? . . .*
BUSY: Yes, mine is of the spirit.
PUPPET DIONYSIUS: *Then idol is a lawful calling.*

⁶⁷Ibid., I.vi.54–55.

⁶⁸Ibid., I.vi.63–67.

⁶⁹Ibid., I.vi.83–87.

LEATHERHEAD: He says, then idol is a lawful calling!
For you called him idol, and your calling is of the spirit.⁷⁰

By the time Jonson is through ringing changes on the word law in *Bartholomew Fair*, the term has become virtually meaningless.⁷¹ The law no longer appears to stand majestically above the marketplace, fully entitled to regulate it. Rather the law is negotiated and renegotiated just like any other item at the fair.

Jonson's antipathy to the Puritans led him to probe deeper into their hostility to the marketplace and he once again finds a connection between their religious beliefs and their economic attitudes. The gamester Quarlous notes that Busy, as a Puritan, rejects all tradition, and claims to remain true to a purified notion of an original faith: "By his profession, he will ever be i' the state of innocence, though, and childhood; derides all antiquity; defies any other learning than inspiration; and what discretion soever years should afford him, it is all prevented in original ignorance."⁷² Busy's hatred for the marketplace grows out of his Puritan hostility to tradition.⁷³ For Busy the marketplace is the locus of business as usual, where men and women go about satisfying the desires they have always had. By catering to what people want, the market stands in the way of the moral reformation Busy is striving for. Unlike the merchants of *Bartholomew Fair*, he will not accept human beings as he finds them, but rather wants to remake them in one grand revolutionary effort. That is why Busy images the moral reformation of the world in terms of an apocalyptic abolition of the marketplace. He defines himself as "one that rejoiceth in his affliction, and sitteth here to prophesy the destruction of fairs and May-games, wakes and Whitsun ales, and doth sigh and groan for the reformation of these abuses."⁷⁴ This passage embodies a profound insight into Puritan psychology and into the political and economic reformer's mentality in

⁷⁰Ibid., V.v.49-50, 52-55.

⁷¹See Marcus, *Politics of Mirth*, pp. 40, 50-51.

⁷²*Bartholomew Fair*, I.iii.129-33.

⁷³See Marcus, *Politics of Mirth*, pp. 51-52; she argues that Busy "has, in effect, undertaken the disestablishment of history."

⁷⁴*Bartholomew Fair*, IV.vi.78-80.

general. Jonson understands that Busy rejects the world as such and wants to see it fundamentally remade. His hostility to life as usual dictates his hostility to business as usual, and hence demands the overthrow of the marketplace as the center of existing abuses. Jonson saw how deeply revolutionary the Puritan mentality was, and events in a few decades were to prove him right.

The Puritan revolutionary impulse manifests itself even on the level of language. Refusing to accept the common names of things, the Puritans become involved in a ridiculous process of trying to rename everything, including themselves: “O, they have all such names, sir; he was witness for Win here — they will not be called godfathers — and named her Win-the-fight. You thought her name had been Winifred, did you not?”⁷⁵ In a play in which signs are often more important than substance, the impulse to rename things is tantamount to the impulse to remake them. Thus, although Busy appears to be an advocate of law and order, like Wasp he turns out to be a force for disorder. He too is guilty of incivility, as Quarlous makes clear in his final summary of the Puritan character: “Away, you are a herd of hypocritical proud ignorants, rather wild than mad, fitter for woods and the society of beasts than houses and the congregation of men. You are. . . outlaws to order and discipline.”⁷⁶

In Busy’s case, Jonson shows that hostility to the marketplace can reflect hostility to civil society as such. Busy’s urge to regulate the fair is rooted in his sense of his superiority to his fellow human beings and his urge to dominate them. Rejecting tradition, common sense, everyday experience, and even the ordinary names for things, Busy is prepared to reorder the world from the ground up and wants to start with the market. For him, the fair is the principal obstacle standing in the way of his creating a perfect world based on his private vision of what is good and evil. Hence in Jonson’s view, Busy represents a greater force for disorder than any of the fair’s malefactors.⁷⁷ Their petty crimes pale

⁷⁵Ibid., I.iii.116–19.

⁷⁶Ibid., V.ii.38–41.

⁷⁷See Brian Gibbons, *Jacobean City Comedy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 186.

by comparison with the dissolution of social order Busy's revolutionary impulses would unleash. Hence, like Wasp, Busy ends up in the stocks. Jonson once again shows that the would-be regulators require regulation more than the people they want to regulate.⁷⁸

V.

Adam Overdo is Jonson's most interesting example of the need to tame the regulatory spirit. Like Wasp and Busy, he claims to devote himself to repressing passions and correcting excesses in others, and yet he is in the grip of passion himself and goes from one excess to another.⁷⁹ Like Busy, he is an overreacher and sets himself up as a god in his little world: "Neither is the hour of my severity yet come, to reveal myself, wherein, cloud-like, I will break out in rain and hail, lightning and thunder, upon the head of enormity."⁸⁰ Overdo is another busy-body and would be a petty tyrant if he had his way. Although he presents himself as a disinterested servant of "the public good,"⁸¹ Jonson suggests that he may be just a social climber, who uses his office to advance his own cause. Wasp reproaches Mistress Overdo: "Why mistress, I knew Adam, the clerk, your husband, when he was Adam scrivener, and writ for twopence a sheet, as high as he bears his head now, or you your hood, dame."⁸² Overdo is a little man who puffs himself up with the thought that he is better than his fellow human beings and seeks to prove it by imposing order on their lives.

Unfortunately for Overdo, he is not equal to the task. He prides himself on his judgment of human nature and his ability to spy into the souls of men. But Jonson shows him making one

⁷⁸See Barish, *Prose Comedy*, p. 236. Marcus (*Politics of Mirth*, p. 47) says of both Busy and Overdo that they "are not just petulant but genuinely seditious."

⁷⁹See Levin, *Multiple Plot*, pp. 206–07.

⁸⁰*Bartholomew Fair*, V.ii.3–5.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, II.i.9.

⁸²*Ibid.*, IV.iv.141–43.

mistake after another.⁸³ He thinks that the robber Edgworth is in fact a “civil” young man and tries to become his patron.⁸⁴ Overdo is particularly susceptible to anyone who will flatter his ego. This tendency becomes evident in his encounter with Trouble-All, a man who went mad when Overdo dismissed him from his position in the Court of Piepowders at the fair. Now Trouble-All will not do anything without a written warrant from Overdo, a form of madness that initially strikes the Justice as evidence of Trouble-All’s wisdom: “What should he be, that doth so esteem and advance my warrant? He seems a sober and discreet person!”⁸⁵ Overdo’s continuing misjudgment of the other characters in the play makes him a laughing-stock and ultimately undermines his authority. As Quarlous points out to him at the end of the play: “your ‘innocent young man’ you have ta’en care of all this day, is a cutpurse that hath got all your brother Cokes his things, and helped you to your beating and the stocks.”⁸⁶ Overdo claims to be able to bring moral order to the world, but he cannot tell good from evil and mistakes criminals and madmen for model citizens. The complete collapse of his regime occurs when he goes to punish a group of prostitutes and discovers that one of them is his own wife in disguise.

When Overdo speaks out against the fair’s merchandise, chiefly alcohol and tobacco, one might be tempted to sympathize with his criticism, but Jonson goes out of his way to caricature Overdo’s complaints and make them sound foolish. Busy inveighs against the products of the fair because he is trying to save the souls of its customers; Overdo is trying to save their bodies. He cautions against alcoholic beverages: “Thirst not after that frothy liquor, ale; for who knows when he openeth the stopple what may be in the bottle? Hath not a snail, a spider, yea, a newt been found there?”⁸⁷ Overdo is also on an anti-smoking crusade:

⁸³See Leggatt, *English Renaissance Comedy*, p. 149, Marcus, *Politics of Mirth*, p. 56, and Slights, *Art of Secrecy*, pp. 154, 169.

⁸⁴*Bartholomew Fair*, II.iv.30.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, IV.i.23–24.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*, V.vi.72–75.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, II.vi.11–14.

“Neither do thou lust after that tawny weed, tobacco. . . Whose complexion is like the Indian’s that vents it! . . . And who can tell, if, before the gathering and making up thereof, the alligator hath not pissed thereon?”⁸⁸ Overdo may be raising slightly different doubts about the safety of alcohol and tobacco products than we hear today, but the basic principle is the same. He distrusts anything exotic and loves to dwell on the worst-case scenario. He goes on to lament the amount of money he thinks is wasted on these luxury products: “Thirty pound a week in bottle-ale! Forty in tobacco! And ten more in ale again.”⁸⁹ At times Overdo sounds like a contemporary campaign against smoking: “Hence it is that the lungs of the tobacconist are rotted, the liver spotted, the brain smoked like the backside of the pig-woman’s booth here.”⁹⁰

Overdo thus offers a puritanism of the body to correspond to Busy’s puritanism of the soul. In either case, the result is the same: strict government control over the everyday activities of ordinary people, with prohibition as the ultimate goal. If it is not clear from the way Jonson has the Justice characteristically overdo his tirade against alcohol and tobacco that the playwright is making fun of this health-conscious puritanism, one might recall that Overdo’s attack on drinking and smoking is identical to Puritan strictures against theater-going (“it’s bad for you,” “it wastes your money,” and so on). Evidently, by the time he wrote *Bartholomew Fair*, Jonson had begun to wonder whether concern for saving souls and bodies would result in the end of the entertainment business as he knew it.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of Jonson’s critique of authority in *Bartholomew Fair* is his anticipation of Hayek’s theory about the benefits of dispersing knowledge in society. Overdo’s scheme to disguise himself and spy out enormities at the fair is an attempt to gain the knowledge he would actually need to regulate the marketplace. Modeling himself on “a worthy worshipful man,”⁹¹ probably “Thomas Middleton, the reforming Lord

⁸⁸Ibid., II.vi.21–26.

⁸⁹Ibid., II.vi.77–78.

⁹⁰Ibid., II.vi.39–41.

⁹¹Ibid., II.i.11–12.

Mayor of London in 1613–14,⁹² Overdo uses his masquerade to seek out a synoptic, even a panoptical view of the economic world of London:

Marry, go you into every alehouse, and down into every cellar; measure the length of puddings, take the gauge of black pots and cans, aye, and custards with a stick; and their circumference with a thread; weigh the loaves of bread on his middle finger; then would he send for 'em, home; give the puddings to the poor, the bread to the hungry, the custards to his children; break the pots and burn the cans himself; he would not trust his corrupt officers; he would do't himself.⁹³

As Overdo describes the Mayor's procedures, they seem a model of regulating the economy. He oversees all economic activity in the city, down to the last detail, and he uses his comprehensive knowledge to correct all injustices, with a particular care to redistributing goods to the poor and needy. The actions of Overdo's model are in fact what most people have in mind when they talk about correcting the failures of the market.

But *Bartholomew Fair* is a comedy and Overdo is one of the chief targets of its satire, not a model of enlightened rule in Jonson's eyes. There is something absurd about the Justice's conception of a centrally planned economy. Indeed, he inadvertently reveals the impossibility of the task. For the governors to regulate the economy successfully, they would need knowledge of every detail of its working, all the way down to weighing every single loaf of bread to the ounce.⁹⁴ But in fact this knowledge in all its

⁹²Gordon Campbell's note in his edition (*Alchemist*, p. 507, line 12). See also Butler, *Selected Plays*, pp. 137, 530. The claim that the mayor referred to was Thomas Hayes can be found in Horsman, *Bartholomew Fair*, pp. xviii–xix and Michael Jamieson, ed., *Ben Jonson: Three Comedies* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin Books, 1966), pp. 481, 483. Slights (*Art of Secrecy*, pp. 153, 209, n. 14) settles the identification in favor of Middleton. For more on the relevance of the Lord Mayor's activities to *Bartholomew Fair*, see Marcus, *Politics of Mirth*, pp. 39, 272, n. 27.

⁹³*Ibid.*, II.i.16–24.

⁹⁴For an example of how specific government regulation and supervision of economic activity could be under the mercantilist principles of the

complexity of detail is never available to any one person or centralized authority, as Jonson's example suggests. The mayor's idea of regulating the economy is to do every job himself, a telling image for the ultimate consequences of government intervention in the economy. The mayor violates the principle of the division of labor, which is the foundation of any advanced economy. In fact, the market works precisely by dispersing knowledge of economic phenomena among a myriad of people and using the pricing mechanism to coordinate their efforts.⁹⁵ The central thrust of entrepreneurial activity is the creation, or at least the ferreting out, of economic knowledge, and this process works best precisely when it is not centralized, but pits many individuals against each other in active competition (with success rewarded and failure punished in financial terms).

Old Regime in Europe, see Robert Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), especially this description of how the French government under the minister Colbert regulated the printing industry in the 1660s (p. 186):

Condemning capitalist "hunger for profit," it stressed the importance of maintaining quality standards, which it defined in great detail. The typeface of three "i"s must be exactly the same in width as one "m," and the "m" must conform precisely to a model "m" deposited with the syndics and deputies of the guild, who were to inspect the thirty-six printing shops once every three months in order to make sure that each contained the requisite minimum of four presses and nine fonts of type, both roman and italic, in good condition.

⁹⁵Leggatt, *English Renaissance Comedy*, p. 150, speaks of the "principle of dispersed attention" in *Bartholomew Fair*. In a very different context, Stallybrass and White make an argument similar to Hayek's: the traditional view of the fair "consigns the subordinate classes to contesting state and class power within a problematic which has positioned them as ignorant, vulgar, uninitiated—as low. In fact 'low' knowledge frequently foregrounds not only the actual conditions of production but also the conditions of bodily pleasure" (*Transgression*, p. 43). If I am reading them correctly, Stallybrass and White are in effect making the point that Austrian economists insist on—that consumers are in a better position than government officials to know what their desires are and how best to satisfy them.

Recognizing this point was Hayek's great contribution to the so-called economic calculation debate concerning socialism, inaugurated by his teacher, Ludwig von Mises, in the 1920s.⁹⁶ Without going into the details of this debate, one may say that events in the Soviet Union and elsewhere in the formerly communist world would appear to have vindicated the Austrian economists Mises and Hayek in their claim that true economic calculation is impossible in the absence of open markets and the monetary accounting they make possible. The Soviet economy eventually collapsed precisely because its central planning proved unable to coordinate, or even just to ascertain, all the economic data involved in a modern system of production and distribution. As the Russian economist Yuri Maltsev writes: "When the Soviet government set 22 million prices, 460,000 wage rates, and over 90 million work quotas for 110 million government employees, chaos and shortages were the inevitable result."⁹⁷ Living long before the age of Marx, Jonson could not have anticipated the economic calculation debate concerning socialism. But he does point ahead to the core of the Mises-Hayek argument, that would-be government regulators are simply inadequate to the task of overseeing the complex division of labor in a modern economy.

Jonson specifically presents the problem of government regulation of the economy as a problem of knowledge. Overdo's

⁹⁶The socialist calculation debate began with Mises's essay "Die Wirtschaftsrechnung in sozialistischen Gemeinwesen," published in the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaften* 47 (1920). For an English translation by S. Adler of this essay, see Ludwig von Mises, *Economic Calculation in the Socialist Commonwealth* (Auburn, Ala.: Praxeology Press, 1990). For Hayek's key contribution on the problem of knowledge, see his "The Use of Knowledge in Society" in his *Individualism and Economic Order* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948). This volume also contains several other chapters on the socialist calculation debate (chap. 7–9). For further contributions to the debate from the free market side, see Ludwig von Mises, *Socialism* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1951) and vol. 10 in *The Collected Works of Friedrich Hayek, Socialism and War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997). For overviews of the socialist calculation debate, see Trygve J.B. Hoff, *Economic Calculation in the Socialist Society* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Liberty Fund, 1981) and David Ramsay Steele, *From Marx to Mises: Post-Capitalist Society and the Challenge of Economic Calculation* (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1992).

⁹⁷See Maltsev's foreword to Mises, *Economic Calculation*, p. vi.

model mayor has ambitious plans for restructuring the economy, and yet he himself does not “trust his corrupt officers”; hence he gets involved in the hopeless task of doing everything in the economy by himself. Overdo realizes the limitations of his knowledge as a government official:

For (alas) as we are public persons, what do we know? Nay, what can we know? We hear with other men's ears; we see with other men's eyes; a foolish constable or a sleepy watchman is all our information; he slanders a gentleman by virtue of his place, as he calls it, and we by the vice of ours, must believe him. . . . This we are subject to, that live in high place; all our intelligence is idle, and most of our intelligencers, knaves; and by your leave, ourselves thought little better, if not arrant fools, for believing 'em.⁹⁸

By impeaching his sources of knowledge, Overdo undermines his authority to regulate the marketplace. Realizing the incompetence and unreliability of the officials he depends on, he ought to realize the futility of his plans. He points out all the reasons why government officials are not in a position to know the relevant economic facts, and his scheme to gain access to that knowledge proves to be a complete and humiliating failure for him. Overdo's noble-sounding vision of an all-seeing and all-knowing government turns out to be a fantasy and a farce. Government officials are limited and fallible human beings themselves and just as likely to make mistakes as merchants in the marketplace. The difference between civil servants and private businessmen is that when a central planner makes a mistake, he is likely to disrupt the whole economy and not just a single business.

VI.

In the eyes of government officialdom, the disguised Overdo appears to be a criminal, and, he, like Wasp and Busy, ends up in the stocks. When he himself is charged with “enormity,” Overdo sees the irony of the situation: “Mine own words turned upon me

⁹⁸*Bartholomew Fair*, II.i.24–34.

like swords.”⁹⁹ The would-be regulators in the play are not happy when they themselves fall under the power of government regulation. Wasp objects to the intrusion of strangers into his business: “Cannot a man quarrel in quietness, but he must be put out on’t by you?”¹⁰⁰ When he learns that the intruders are “His Majesty’s Watch,” Wasp is not pleased with the government’s panoptical surveillance: “A body would think, an you watched well o’ nights, you should be contented to sleep at this time o’ day.”¹⁰¹ Wasp would like a respite from the all-seeing eye of the government. One gets the sense from *Bartholomew Fair* that Jonson, several times the victim of government surveillance himself, sympathized with this position.

The madman Trouble-All provides the inverted mirror image of an all-seeing, all-knowing government. He is the perfect subject of a panoptical regime,¹⁰² the man who will not make a move without express warrant from a government official: “he will do nothing but by Justice Overdo’s warrant: he will not eat a crust, nor drink a little, nor make him in his apparel ready. His wife, sir-reverence, cannot get him make his water or shift his shirt without his warrant.”¹⁰³ Here finally is someone who would presumably heed Overdo’s invectives against alcohol and tobacco. But Trouble-All provides the *reductio ad absurdum* of the regulatory ideal. In a total command economy, people would insanely and slavishly refuse to do anything without explicit government approval. Even Overdo is appalled at what he has done to transform Trouble-All into a figure wholly dependent on authority for guidance: “If this be true, this is my greatest disaster!”¹⁰⁴

⁹⁹Ibid., III.v.203.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., IV.iv.147–48.

¹⁰¹Ibid., IV.iv.149–52.

¹⁰²Leggatt, *English Renaissance Comedy*, describes Trouble-All as a “citizen of an authoritarian state” and “a figure Kafka might have invented” (pp. 150–51). See also Marcus, *Politics of Mirth*, p. 56. For a contrary view of Trouble-All and his obsession with warrants, see Wilson, *Theaters of Intention*, p. 119.

¹⁰³*Bartholomew Fair*, IV.i.51–54. See also IV.ii.4–5, 86–87, 98–99; IV.vi.4, 114–15.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., IV.i.55.

Overdo's encounter with Trouble-All begins to teach him a lesson: "I will be more tender hereafter. I see compassion may become a Justice, though it be a weakness, I confess, and nearer a vice than a virtue."¹⁰⁵ Overdo still clings to his moralism here, but he has begun to understand the disastrous consequences of his attempt to impose his vision of law and order on the world. Overdo learns a Hayekian lesson, what one might call the law of unintended consequences: "To see what bad events may peep out o' the tail of good purposes!"¹⁰⁶ Jonson seems to measure his characters by the results of their actions, not their motives. The do-gooders in *Bartholomew Fair* cause most of the difficulties in the play and all the near-disasters. And the reason is that, in Jonson's view, life in general and the marketplace in particular are just too complicated for these simplistic and moralistic regulatory schemes to work successfully. Actions have unanticipated consequences and efforts to control events succeed only in producing disorder and eventually chaos. Overdo must learn to accept life for what it is, admit his own limitations, and abandon his plans for perfecting and reforming the world.¹⁰⁷ As Quarlous tells him in the end: "remember you are but Adam, flesh and blood! You have your frailty; forget your other name of Overdo, and invite us all to supper. There you and I will . . . drown the memory of all enormity in your biggest bowl at home."¹⁰⁸ Jonson presents the festive spirit of comedy as the triumph of humanity and freedom over petty moralism and officious government.¹⁰⁹

With its carnival atmosphere, *Bartholomew Fair* ends up celebrating the libertarian and even libertine spirit of comedy.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁵Ibid., IV.i.73-75.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., III.iii.12-13. On the importance of the "unintended result" in the play, see Levin, *Multiple Plot*, p. 211.

¹⁰⁷See Horsman, *Bartholomew Fair*, p. xii.

¹⁰⁸*Bartholomew Fair*, V.vi.93-97.

¹⁰⁹See Barish, *Prose Comedy*, p. 236 and Maus, *Roman Frame*, p. 134. For a classic study of the festive spirit of comedy, see C. L. Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1959).

¹¹⁰For the importance of carnival elements in *Bartholomew Fair*, and an application of M.M. Bakhtin's influential theory of the carnivalesque to the play, see Stallybrass and White, *Transgression*, pp. 59-79.

Comedies focus on the satisfaction of desire, allowing audiences to see their dreams acted out on stage and thus to indulge in a fantasy of wish fulfillment. In a typical romantic comedy, for example, all the obstacles in the way of the young lovers consummating their passion must be removed.¹¹¹ As in *Bartholomew Fair*, the various blocking agents standing in the way of the fulfillment of desire must be defeated, usually by making them look ridiculous. Authority figures like parents, priests, and judges—who claim to represent law and order—must yield to the kaleidoscopic play of desire. From the standpoint of traditional authority, this outcome appears to mark the collapse of order and an outbreak of chaos. But in the world of comedy, the apparently chaotic power of desire turns out to represent the force of life itself, and thus to answer to a deeper form of order, an organic, natural, or spontaneous order. In comedy, the artificial rigidity of law must yield to the natural flexibility of desire, or risk stultifying basic human impulses.

Hence a comedy like *Bartholomew Fair* affirms the comic virtues of flexibility, adaptability, and even pliancy—exactly the virtues of the marketplace, as Jonson discovers. The active participants in the fair are always willing to go with the flow, never letting principles stand in the way of their enjoyment of life. By contrast, the men of principle in the play do wish to interfere with the free satisfaction of basic human desires (which they regard as evil, sinful, or illegal). Busy, with his fanatical devotion to religious dogma, and Overdo, with his obsession with the moral absolute of justice, would be more at home in the world of tragedy, where integrity and uncompromising principles are regarded as the true virtues. But what is celebrated as integrity in tragedy is laughed at as stubbornness in comedy. As we have seen, both Busy and Overdo must learn to abandon their strict adherence to their principles for them to be reintegrated into society and for a comic outcome to prevail. They must learn to recognize their own limitations as human beings, and the limitations of their principles, in order to be civil—to get along with their fellow citizens in a peaceful society.

¹¹¹For a synoptic analysis of comic form, see Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (New York: Atheneum, 1966), pp. 163–86.

In short, in *Bartholomew Fair* the unbending men of principle must learn to bend their principles in the spirit of comedy. Busy and Overdo ultimately prove to be comic figures because, unlike tragic figures, they are unwilling to die for their principles, or even to suffer for them very long. Indeed, they are in the end exposed to be frauds—would-be tragic heroes in a comic world—pretentious overreachers who are not what they claim to be.¹¹² Far from being raised above the ordinary level of humanity, they turn out to be quite ordinary themselves, sharing the desires and foibles of the people they wished to lord over. In the typical pattern of comedy, *Bartholomew Fair* shows society re-assimilating into its ranks the men who initially but falsely claimed to stand above their fellow citizens. What is distinctive about *Bartholomew Fair* is the fact that Jonson portrays this process as specifically a matter of assimilating to a *marketplace*—Busy and Overdo must learn to join in the fun of the fair. Indeed, in this play Jonson presents a marketplace as an epitome of society, and the principle of comedy—the idea that the common element of desire in humanity provides the basis for sociability—turns out to be the principle of the market as well. Insofar as the market, like comedy, is devoted to the satisfaction of desire, one might say that Jonson suggests in *Bartholomew Fair* that the principle of the market is the principle of comedy.¹¹³

In the spirit of comic flexibility, Jonson develops a thoroughgoing critique of the rigidity of law in *Bartholomew Fair*. The spokesmen for authority in *Bartholomew Fair* want to contrast the ordered and stable world of law with the chaotic and unstable world of the marketplace. But Jonson's satiric view of the would-be regulators suggests a different perspective. He seems to contrast the rigid and stultifying world of law with the fluid and vibrant world of the marketplace. As happens in many comedies,

¹¹²For this understanding of the relation of comedy to tragedy, see José Ortega y Gasset, *Meditations on Quixote*, Evelyn Rugg and Diego Marín, trans. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1961), pp. 156–59.

¹¹³The principle that unites comedy and the market may appear to be paradoxical—the principle that one should have no principles. To formulate this idea more accurately: one should always be willing to bend one's principles if they stand in the way of the proper enjoyment of life.

in *Bartholomew Fair* Jonson portrays the dead weight of the law as the obstacle standing in the way of the characters satisfying their normal human desires. The law appears in the first speech in the play proper, in stilted legal language: "Here's Master Bartholomew Cokes, of Harrow o'the hill, i'the county of Middlesex, Esquire, takes forth his license to marry Mistress Grace Wellborn of the said place and county."¹¹⁴ The first manifestation of the power of law in *Bartholomew Fair* significantly takes the form of a marriage license.¹¹⁵ The law seeks to regulate the free play of erotic desire, to confine it to acceptable and predictable channels. Jonson emphasizes the way the law gives power to some human beings to dispose of the lives of others, with men usually ruling over women, and parents over children. He makes one of the marriage plots turn on the fact that Grace Wellborn is the legal ward of Adam Overdo, and thus his to dispose of in marriage.¹¹⁶ In Grace's statement of her position, Jonson stresses the arbitrariness of her status and her dissatisfaction with it. When asked how she became Overdo's ward, Grace bitterly replies: "Faith, through a common calamity: he bought me, sir; and now he will marry me to his wife's brother, . . . or else I must pay value o' my land."¹¹⁷ Evidently, human beings are bought and sold in the legal world just as commodities are bought and sold in the marketplace.¹¹⁸ Far from providing an alternative to the venality of the market, the law seems to operate according to the same formula. Indeed, in Jonson's presentation, the law seems worse than the market. It gives people the right to buy and sell other human beings, not just commodities.

¹¹⁴*Bartholomew Fair*, I.i.3–5.

¹¹⁵On the importance of the marriage license in the play, see Sanders, *Theatrical Republics*, pp. 90–91 and Slights, *Art of Secrecy*, pp. 161–62. On the importance of the word *license* in the play, and its ambiguity, see Ian McAdam, "The Puritan Dialectic of Law and Grace in *Bartholomew Fair*," *Studies in English Literature* 46 (2006): 425.

¹¹⁶On the issue of legal wards in the play, see Wilson, *Theaters of Intention*, pp. 131–34.

¹¹⁷*Bartholomew Fair*, III.v.260–62.

¹¹⁸Leggatt, *English Renaissance Comedy*, p. 145.

Women especially do not fare well in the legal world of *Bartholomew Fair*. In their homes, they seem to be the chattel property of their husbands, fathers, and guardians. That perhaps explains why the women in the play are particularly eager to go to the fair. For them, entering the marketplace represents a kind of liberation. Jonson suggests this point comically when several of the women quite literally enter the marketplace—that is, are enlisted into prostitution. He certainly is not advocating prostitution as a way of life, but he approaches the subject with greater freedom and less moralism than Justice Overdo does. Half jokingly, Jonson has the bawd Captain Whit try to teach Win Littlewit that she ought to prefer the life of a prostitute to that of a married woman: “de honest woman’s life is a scurvy dull life.”¹¹⁹ The chief reason Whit offers for his claim is that a wife leads “de leef of a bondwoman,” whereas he tells Win: “I vill make tee a free-woman.”¹²⁰ The cutpurse Edgworth reinforces the point to Win later in the play: “Is not this a finer life, lady, than to be clogged with a husband?”¹²¹ In *Bartholomew Fair*, the legal institution of marriage is presented as a form of slavery, while entering the marketplace as a prostitute appears to be a form of freedom.

Viewed from one perspective, prostitution is one of the chief vices of the fair, but in the full context of the play, it is difficult for the advocates of law and order to use prostitution as an argument against the marketplace. Jonson does everything he can to efface the distinction between prostitutes and married women, as he shows men buying women in marriage.¹²² Quarlous thinks of the legal institution as in fact a way to marry money itself:

Why should not I marry this six thousand pound. . . ?
And a good trade too, that she has beside, ha?. . . It is
money that I want; why should I not marry the money,

¹¹⁹*Bartholomew Fair*, IV.v.26–27.

¹²⁰*Ibid.*, IV.v.29–30.

¹²¹*Ibid.*, V.iv.53–54.

¹²²See Leggatt, *English Renaissance Comedy*, p. 147, *Slights, Art of Secrecy*, pp. 160, 163, 166, Bruster, *Drama and the Market*, pp. 42–43, 57, and Agnew, *Worlds Apart*, p. 129.

when 'tis offered me? I have a license and all; it is but
 razing out one name and putting in another.¹²³

Quarlous also reveals the arbitrariness of legal documents: they are supposed to embody the sanctity of the law, but it is an easy matter to doctor them.¹²⁴ Depending on how the writing is altered, a legal document can mean almost anything. There are a number of “blank checks” in the form of legal documents circulating in *Bartholomew Fair*,¹²⁵ including the open warrant that Overdo thinks he is giving to the madman Trouble-All but that actually falls into the hands of Quarulous. He immediately grasps the possibilities of having the justice’s signature on a blank document: “Why should not I ha’ the conscience to make this a bond of a thousand pound, now?”¹²⁶ But Quarulous finds a better use for this blank document: to certify transferring Grace as a ward from Overdo to himself. Thus, he, not Overdo, becomes the beneficiary when Grace must pay money to her guardian for the right to marry Winwife.

Jonson’s criticism of the law is double-edged. On the one hand, the law appears to be too rigid; with its iron hand, it tries to define all human relationships, and keep people confined to the straight and narrow path. But on the other hand, the law appears to be too flexible and arbitrary; with a stroke of a pen, a man can alter a legal document and redefine a human relationship. Ultimately, in Jonson’s portrayal the problem with the law is its mindless legalism. The law tries to codify the fluidity of life into binding rules, but as Jonson shows in *Bartholomew Fair*, once a legal document is written down, it can all too easily be rewritten. As Jonson presents it, the law seems to alternate between defining the terms of human life too tightly and defining them too loosely.¹²⁷

¹²³*Bartholomew Fair*, V.ii.69–75.

¹²⁴For good discussions of the dubious status of legal documents in the play, see Slights, *Art of Secrecy*, pp. 154, 170, and Marcus, *Politics of Mirth*, p. 40.

¹²⁵See Leggatt, *English Renaissance Comedy*, p. 140.

¹²⁶*Bartholomew Fair*, V.ii.112–13.

¹²⁷See McAdam, “Puritan Dialectic,” especially p. 415: “The play suggests the need, in human social life, for a balance between too much law and too little law.”

Indeed, in its effort to be absolute, the law ends up looking arbitrary. Thus, in *Bartholomew Fair* efforts to impose order through law repeatedly have the opposite effect—they create chaos. By interfering with the spontaneous order of the marketplace and the free play of desire, the law ultimately undermines its own authority and threatens to disrupt the foundations of society.

VII.

The fact that Jonson develops such a thoroughgoing critique of the law and its representatives in *Bartholomew Fair* does not mean that he is blind to the failings of the marketplace. On the contrary, as we have seen, he is well-aware of all the shortcomings of the fair and the emerging market economy it represents—if anything, he exaggerates them. But when Jonson compares the would-be regulators of the market with the people they wish to regulate, on balance he seems to side with the latter. On the whole, the apparently unregulated markets of the fair stand for order in the play, while their would-be regulators actually prove to be the motive forces for disorder. Jonson presents the merchants as generally cooperating with one another, if only in schemes to defraud and rob their customers.¹²⁸ They are of course not saints, but they are not quite sinners either; at least they are not as evil as Busy and Overdo claim they are. Many of the merchants provide legitimate goods and services to their customers and Jonson presents the fair as a life-enhancing force. After all, people flock to it voluntarily and thus it must be performing some sort of service to the community.

By contrast, the characters who try to shut down the fair are the spoilsports of the play, and must be defeated for the comic ending to be possible. In seeking to please the public, the fair may cater too much for Jonson's taste to the baser appetites of the London populace. And yet all that the opponents of the fair have to set against these natural desires is their anger and their moral indignation, as Wasp, Busy, and Overdo repeatedly prove. And

¹²⁸See Haynes, *Social Relations*, p. 124: "all the crimes are committed by a team."

in Jonson's portrayal, this anger turns out to be just as irrational as desire and more socially disruptive. As we have seen, Jonson suggests at several points that religious and moral hostility to the marketplace easily translates into a revolutionary impulse and may in fact tear the fabric of society apart.

In earlier plays such as *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*, Jonson had dwelled upon the ways in which the emerging market economy was itself a revolutionary force, threatening to upset the settled order of society and above all to overthrow the social hierarchy by making poor men rich and rich men poor. But in *Bartholomew Fair*, Jonson appears to rethink his view of the social effects of the market economy, or at least to refine it. He now dwells on the ways in which the market allows people to negotiate their differences and thus actually helps to bring them together. The market provides an image of social harmony in *Bartholomew Fair*, not a harmony without conflict, but one in which the tensions among the characters can be worked out as the participants in the fair come to realize their common economic interests.

Jonson shows the way the market tends to level differences. *Bartholomew Fair* is a place where people from all walks of life meet and interact freely.¹²⁹ The market does a particularly good job of reducing social pretensions. Winwife tries to put on airs when he first comes to the fair and acts as if the commercial world were beneath him: "That these people should be so ignorant to think us chapmen for 'em! Do we look as if we would buy gingerbread? Or hobby-horses?"¹³⁰ But Quarlous points out that to enter the fair is to accept it on its own terms and acknowledge

¹²⁹See Barish, *Prose Comedy*, pp. 189, 231. Horsman (*Bartholomew Fair*, p. 189) quotes a near contemporary description of the fair (1641):

Hither resort people of all sorts, High and Low, Rich and Poore, from cities, townes, and countrys; of all sects, Papists, Atheists, Anabaptists, and Brownists: and of all conditions, good and bad, vertuous and vitious, Knaves and fooles, Cuckolds and Cuckoldmakers, Bauds, and Whores, Pimpes and Panders, Rogues and Rascalls, the little Loud-one and the witty wanton.

¹³⁰*Bartholomew Fair*, II.v.10-12.

kinship with the rest of the customers: "Why, they know no better ware than they have, nor better customers than come. And our very being here makes us fit to be demanded as well as others."¹³¹ In fact the only people the fair works to exclude are zealots like Busy and Overdo who will not accept its terms and admit their common humanity. Unlike the merchants, they are uncompromising and refuse to negotiate their differences with others.¹³² By contrast, in the fair, money provides a common currency by means of which people can settle their accounts, financial and otherwise.

Jonson's new-found sympathy for the marketplace seems to have grown out of his recognition that his theater world was inextricably intertwined with the emerging market economy of his day. *Bartholomew Fair* reflects Jonson's insight that the theater is a kind of marketplace and the marketplace a kind of theater. The impossibility of separating the theater from the marketplace is central to Jonson's conception of *Bartholomew Fair*.¹³³ The fair itself is highly theatrical, with the merchants hawking their wares in colorful and dramatic ways. Twice Jonson has advertisements for common products like rattles, drums, hobby-horses, mousetraps, pears, and gingerbread blend right into

¹³¹Ibid., II.v.13-15.

¹³²Slights (*Art of Secrecy*, pp. 160-61) makes a similar point and in support of it quotes the *Table-Talk* of Jonson's friend John Selden:

Disputes in Religion will never be ended, because there wants a Measure by which the Business would be decided: The Puritan would be judged by the Word of God: If he would speak clearly, he means himself. . . . Ben Johnson Satyrically express'd the vain Disputes of Divines by *Inigo Lanthorne*, disputing with his puppet in a *Bartholomew Fair*. It is so; It is not so: It is so, It is not so, crying thus one to another a quarter of an Hour together.

¹³³See Maus, *Roman Frame*, p. 155: "he argues that since theatricality is everywhere it is pointless to object to the stage as if it presented a unique moral threat." See also Marcus, *Politics of Mirth*, p. 43, Wilson, *Theaters of Intention*, p. 140, and Wayne, "Drama and Society," pp. 105-08. The connection between the theater and the marketplace is the central theme of Agnew's *Worlds Apart*; see especially pp. ix-x, 12, 60.

advertisements for ballads,¹³⁴ as if to suggest that art is merchandised at the fair like any other commodity. The ballad-singer Nightingale turns out to be in league with the cutpurse Edgworth. According to Edgworth's instructions, Nightingale helps distract potential victims with his songs while the cutpurse robs them, and he also helps dispose of stolen goods.¹³⁵ Far from trying to suggest that art stands apart from the marketplace, Jonson shows the artistic figures in the play deeply implicated in even the most dubious commercial activities at the fair.

At the same time, Jonson goes out of his way to describe the criminal activity at the fair in theatrical terms. Quarlous views Edgworth's robberies on the model of a drama: "We had wonderful ill luck to miss this prologue o' the purse, but the best is we shall have five acts of him ere night."¹³⁶ Edgworth himself thinks of his thievery in theatrical terms. That is why he insists on having Winwife present to view his pickpocketing of Cokes: "except you would go with me and see't, it's not worth speaking on. The act is nothing without a witness."¹³⁷ Edgworth is a curiously artistic pickpocket. Instead of operating in secret as one would expect, he seeks a public for his crimes to put his skill on display. Throughout *Bartholomew Fair*, art seems to blend imperceptibly into crime and crime into art.

Bartholomew Fair culminates in the staging of Littlewit's play at the puppet theater, thus firmly bringing the world of drama within the world of the fair. And Jonson does not pull any punches. He portrays the puppet theater operating according to the same questionable business ethic that prevails throughout the fair. Lantern Leatherhead, a hobby-horse seller who doubles as the puppet master, reveals that the entertainment industry advertises as aggressively as anyone at the fair: "Out with the sign of our invention, in the name of wit, and do you beat the drum the while."¹³⁸ The theater is in the business of making

¹³⁴*Bartholomew Fair*, II.ii.28-40, II.iv.3-19.

¹³⁵*Ibid.*, II.iv.35-38.

¹³⁶*Ibid.*, III.ii.1-3.

¹³⁷*Ibid.*, IV.iii.98-99.

¹³⁸*Ibid.*, V.i.1-3.

money and the more money the better. When Leatherhead tells his box-office assistant Sharkwell: "An there come any gentlefolks, take twopence a piece," his sidekick ups the ante: "I warrant you, sir, threepence an we can."¹³⁹ In the event, Cokes, fool that he is, insists on gentlemanly profligacy and offers to pay "twelvepence" to see the play,¹⁴⁰ which, curiously enough, turns out to be the going rate for prostitutes at the fair as well.¹⁴¹ Cokes expects to see the same products merchandised at the theater that are available elsewhere in the marketplace: "Ha'you none of your pretty impudent boys now, to bring stools, fill tobacco, fetch ale, and beg money, as they have at other houses?"¹⁴²

While the theater operators at the fair are constantly trying to raise their prices, Jonson also shows them cheapening their product. Jonson has no illusions about the artistic merits of the plays staged at the puppet theater. Since Leatherhead is interested only in making money, his sole consideration is what the public wants to see and he will do anything to avoid a box-office disaster: "All the fowl i' the Fair, I mean all the dirt in Smithfield, . . . will be thrown at our banners today, if the matter does not please the people."¹⁴³ Jonson makes it clear that Leatherhead's insistence on catering to the theater-going public keeps his artistic standards low: "*The Gunpowder Plot*, there was a get-penny! I have presented that to an eighteen- or twenty-pence audience nine times in an afternoon. Your home-born projects prove ever the best; they are so easy and familiar. They put too much learning in their things nowadays, and that I fear will be the spoil o' this."¹⁴⁴

To maximize his profits, Leatherhead targets the lowest common denominator in his potential audience. He wants to give the public something simple and familiar. Thus, when he stages a play about Hero and Leander, he refuses to remain faithful to

¹³⁹Ibid., V.i.19-21.

¹⁴⁰Ibid., V.iii.37. See Sanders, *Theatrical Republics*, p. 102 and Wilson, *Theaters of Intention*, pp. 145-46.

¹⁴¹Ibid., V.iv.49.

¹⁴²Ibid., V.iii.56-58.

¹⁴³Ibid., V.i.3-5.

¹⁴⁴Ibid., V.i.10-15.

Christopher Marlowe's elegant version of the story: "that is too learned and poetical for our audience. What do they know what Hellespont is? 'Guilty of true love's blood'? Or what Abydos is? Or 'the other Sestos high'?"¹⁴⁵ Leatherhead adapts the story to the capacity and interests of his audience: "I have entreated Master Littlewit to take a little pains to reduce it to a more familiar strain for our people."¹⁴⁶ The result is what can best be described as an adulterated version of the Hero and Leander story, as Littlewit explains:

I have only made it a little easy and modern for the times . . . ; as, for the Hellespont, I imagine our Thames here; and then Leander, I make a dyer's son, about Puddle Wharf; and Hero a wench o' the Bankside, who going over one morning to Old Fish Street, Leander spies her at Trig Stairs, and falls in love with her.¹⁴⁷

Jonson shows the principle of adulterating products just as much at work in the theater as elsewhere in the fair.¹⁴⁸ By having the classical story of Hero and Leander modernized, Leatherhead cheapens it and corrupts it, solely with a view to box-office receipts and with no regard for aesthetic considerations. It is difficult to imagine how Jonson could have given a portrait of the commercial theater more negative than what he offers in *Bartholomew Fair*. The actual puppet play is as lame as the Pyramus and Thisbe interlude in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, filled with couplets like this:

*O Leander, Leander, my dear, my dear Leander,
I'll for ever be thy goose, so thou'lt be my gander.*¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁵Ibid., V.iii.97–100. On Jonson's use of Marlowe, see James Shapiro, *Rival Playwrights: Marlowe, Jonson, Shakespeare* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 68–70.

¹⁴⁶Ibid., V.iii.102–03.

¹⁴⁷Ibid., V.iii.106–111.

¹⁴⁸See Butler, *Selected Plays*, pp. 530–31, Marcus, *Politics of Mirth*, p. 46, Agnew, *Worlds Apart*, p. 118, and Sanders, *Theatrical Republics*, pp. 102–03.

¹⁴⁹*Bartholomew Fair*, V.iv.275–76.

But despite portraying the theater as negatively as possible in *Bartholomew Fair*, Jonson chooses to defend it against its critics.¹⁵⁰ By portraying what is in effect a worst-case scenario, he is able to make his point clearer—any theater is better than no theater at all. Jonson sees that to come to the defense of the theater, he cannot simply champion good drama; he must defend the theater as such, and that must include the commercial world of bad drama.¹⁵¹ Of course, he could not forego the opportunity to have some fun at the expense of his fellow playwrights in *Bartholomew Fair*, as he had been doing throughout his dramatic career.¹⁵² As we have seen, for much of his life he tried to distance himself from the commercial theater, and prove that he was above the need to cater to the general public, and hence capable of writing with aristocratic taste in view. The fact that *Bartholomew Fair* was staged at court suggests that Jonson was using the opportunity to continue to mock the popular taste of the commercial theaters.¹⁵³ But for once Jonson chooses to moderate and mitigate his critique of the commercial theater, as if he had come to appreciate how much it had contributed to his own success. In fact his greatest plays were written for the commercial theater, and if at times the general public forced him to compromise his aesthetic principles, it also spurred him on to his highest artistic achievements.

Accordingly, for all Jonson's own criticism of the theater in *Bartholomew Fair*, the theater people come off better than do their vocal critics in the play. It is as if Jonson is closing ranks with his fellow dramatists, even the incompetents among them, against the rising opposition to the theater as such, led by the Puritans. As is the case in Jonson's treatment of the marketplace in general,

¹⁵⁰See Horsman, *Bartholomew Fair*, p. xvii and Barish, *Prose Comedy*, p. 230.

¹⁵¹See Waith, *Bartholomew Fair*, p. 17, Barish, *Prose Comedy*, pp. 234–36, 238–39, and Gibbons, *City Comedy*, p. 190: "it is this whole tradition, from the great Morality play to the crudest Popular farce . . . that Jonson sets out to defend: and if the ballads are banned, it will be only a matter of time before *The Alchemist* is banned too."

¹⁵²For the possibility that Jonson was using the puppet show to make fun specifically of his masque collaborator Inigo Jones, see Riggs, *Jonson*, pp. 193–95.

¹⁵³See Sanders, *Theatrical Republics*, p. 103.

those who try to regulate the theater turn out to be more vicious than the people they are trying to regulate. As Cokes says of the theater people, “they are a civil company.”¹⁵⁴ They are just trying to entertain the public, and, even though they are artistically inadequate, they evidently succeed in pleasing their audience. They may in some sense overcharge for their services, but in the end in Jonson’s view they harm no one. By contrast, Jonson portrays the anti-theatrical forces in the play in a much more negative light. He presents them as meddling and self-important, concerned chiefly with their own ends and not the welfare of the public they claim to be defending. They represent a far greater threat to the integrity of art than the simple incompetence of the puppeteers.

Indeed, Jonson offers the anti-theater arguments in *Bartholomew Fair* as the culmination and the *reductio ad absurdum* of the anti-marketplace arguments, and it is of course Busy’s Puritanism that leads the way to absurdity. Distrust of money-making and advertising, of sharp practices and commercial activity in general, eventually leads to condemnation of the theater. For Busy the theater is a “heathenish idol” and the theatrical “profession” is “damnable.”¹⁵⁵ He vents all the typical Puritan charges against the theater, but to cut him down to size, Jonson has him make his accusations to a puppet. As Quarlous says: “I know no fitter match than a puppet to commit with an hypocrite!”¹⁵⁶ Busy exchanges arguments with the Puppet Dionysius, building up to his chief charge against the theater: “my main argument against you is that you are an abomination; for the male among you putteth on the apparel of the female, and the female of the male.”¹⁵⁷ This accusation proves to be Busy’s downfall, for the puppet has an easy answer to it: “*It is your old stale argument against the players, but it will not hold against the puppets,*

¹⁵⁴*Bartholomew Fair*, V.iii.84.

¹⁵⁵*Ibid.*, V.v.4-5, 18-19.

¹⁵⁶*Ibid.*, V.v. 43-44. Other editions, including Waith, Butler, and Jamieson, attribute this line to Grace, but that would make no difference to the point I am making.

¹⁵⁷*Ibid.*, V.v.86-88.

for we have neither male nor female amongst us.”¹⁵⁸ Pulling up his garment, the Puppet Dionysius reveals that he has no sexual organs whatsoever and thus cannot be accused of cross-dressing. As is only appropriate, the Puritan Busy is defeated by his own literalism.¹⁵⁹ Unable to distinguish illusion from reality, he has all along refused to acknowledge that the theater is harmless because it is a make-believe world.¹⁶⁰ Leatherhead had already allayed Cokes’s concern that the puppets might be hurting each other: “Between you and I, sir, we do but make show.”¹⁶¹ The Puppet Dionysius finally forces Busy to face the facts; his opposition to the theater suddenly collapses and he is willing to join the ranks of the audience: “Let it go on, for I am changed, and will become a beholder with you!”¹⁶²

But even after Busy gets his comeuppance, Jonson has one more enemy of the theater to expose and defeat. Busy represents the religious opposition to the theater; Overdo represents the political,¹⁶³ and as Busy falls, the Justice rises to pronounce sentence on the puppet show as a prime example of “enormity” at the fair.¹⁶⁴ Throughout the play, Overdo has been suspicious of any kind of artistic activity, especially of poetry.¹⁶⁵ Although he mistakenly thinks Edgworth is an honest young man, he is troubled by the fact that he associates with the ballad-singer Nightingale: “I begin shrewdly to suspect their familiarity; and the young man of a terrible taint, poetry! With which idle disease, if he be infected, there’s no hope of him in a state-course.”¹⁶⁶ Obsessed with his narrow conception of justice, Overdo always allows political considerations to override artistic, and hence

¹⁵⁸*Ibid.*, V.v.90–92.

¹⁵⁹See Slights, *Art of Secrecy*, p. 161.

¹⁶⁰See Barish, *Prose Comedy*, p. 237 and Maus, *Roman Frame*, p. 154.

¹⁶¹*Bartholomew Fair*, V.iv.260.

¹⁶²*Ibid.*, V.v.104–05.

¹⁶³See Barish, *Prose Comedy*, pp. 209–10.

¹⁶⁴*Bartholomew Fair*, V.v.112.

¹⁶⁵See Butler, *Selected Plays*, p. 531, and Sanders, *Theatrical Republics*, pp. 97–98.

¹⁶⁶*Bartholomew Fair*, III.v.4–7.

there is no room for poetry in his life.¹⁶⁷ The only poem he claims to like is Nightingale's "A Caveat against cutpurses," because it seems to aid Overdo's investigation into criminality at the fair: "It doth discover enormity, I'll mark it more; I ha' not liked a paltry piece of poetry so well a good while."¹⁶⁸

Overdo will accept poetry only when it serves a simple moral purpose. Hence he despises the commercial theater and attacks Leatherhead as a "profane professor of puppetry, little better than poetry."¹⁶⁹ Fortunately for the theater, just as Overdo is about to pass judgment on it, he discovers that the puppeteers are mixed up with the prostitutes at the fair and his own wife is among the prostitutes. Finally recognizing the folly of his position, Overdo is reconciled to the theater and even invites the actors to his home for supper with his last words in the play.¹⁷⁰ Jonson's suspicion of religious and political authority in *Bartholomew Fair* ultimately seems to be rooted in their common hostility to poetry and drama. He is skeptical of anyone who sets himself up to "give the law to all the poets."¹⁷¹ And he seems to have realized that hostility to poetry and hostility to the marketplace go hand in hand, for the two realms cater to ordinary human desires, and indeed the theater is only a special case of the marketplace.

¹⁶⁷See Slights, *Art of Secrecy*, p. 150.

¹⁶⁸*Bartholomew Fair*, III.v.110–11. Ironically, although Overdo thinks that Nightingale's ballad is a genuine warning against cutpurses, it is in fact part of Edgworth's plan to distract Cokes while his purse is stolen. Even more ironically, earlier in the play it is Overdo's own moralistic sermon against alcohol and tobacco that provides the diversion Edgworth needs to steal Cokes's purse. See Gibbons, *City Comedy*, p. 183 and Slights, *Art of Secrecy*, pp. 164–65.

¹⁶⁹*Bartholomew Fair*, V.vi.39.

¹⁷⁰*Ibid.*, V.vi.106–08.

¹⁷¹*Ibid.*, I.i.35.

VIII.

Overdo's reconciliation with the theater world seems to reflect Jonson's own. In some respects, Overdo may be a satiric self-portrait on Jonson's part.¹⁷² Like his creator, Overdo is fond of showing off his learning and quoting Latin, especially classical poets such as Horace.¹⁷³ Again like his creator, Overdo fancies himself a moral reformer, and perhaps in Jonson's portrayal of the Justice getting carried away with his quest to spy out enormities in the world, he was trying to teach himself a lesson. Like Overdo, Jonson seems to be learning in the course of *Bartholomew Fair* that he should go easier on humanity.¹⁷⁴ Above all, Jonson seems to abandon his longstanding quarrel with the commercial theater and seeks to make his peace with his audience. In a stroke of genius, Jonson chose to image his reconciliation with the commercial theater in the form of a legal contract.

In the induction to *Bartholomew Fair*, the audience learns that the play will not begin until they agree to "certain articles drawn out in haste between our author and you."¹⁷⁵ A scrivener comes out on stage to read the contract to the audience, a document loaded with as much legalese as Jonson could muster:

Articles of Agreement indented between the spectators or hearers at the Hope on the Bankside in the county of Surrey on the one party; and the author of *Bartholomew Fair* in the said place and county on the other party; the one and thirtieth day of October 1614, and in the twelfth year of the reign of our Sovereign Lord, James, by the grace of God King of England, France, and Ireland, Defender of the Faith. And of Scotland the seven and fortieth.¹⁷⁶

Here Jonson hits upon a form of law that can work in favor of the marketplace in general and the theater in particular. In the

¹⁷²See Riggs, *Jonson*, p. 207 and Barish, *Prose Comedy*, pp. 212–13.

¹⁷³See, for example, *Bartholomew Fair*, II.i.5, V.vi.106–07.

¹⁷⁴*Ibid.*, V.vi.106–07.

¹⁷⁵*Ibid.*, Ind., ll. 34–35.

¹⁷⁶*Ibid.*, Ind., ll. 58–64.

statutes of the criminal law, the state stands above its citizens and tells them what they can and cannot do. By contrast, contracts are a matter of civil law and are drawn up between consenting parties, who agree to matters of mutual benefit. In many respects, the contract is the very heart and soul of the marketplace: two parties agreeing to an exchange of goods or services of their own free will and without any government compulsion (except perhaps to enforce the contract).

Living in a commercial society today, we are so used to the power of contracts that it is hard for us to realize that there ever was a time when they represented a new and mysterious force in the world. But in fact, as Sir Henry Sumner Maine argued, the movement from feudalism to capitalism, from the medieval to the modern world, was largely a matter of moving from status to contract, from people having their relations defined for them by their birth to people being able to negotiate and hence change their place in society.¹⁷⁷ One can see the “shock of the new” with regard to contracts at several points in English Renaissance drama, most notably in Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*, where a contract appears as something mysterious, magical, and downright diabolical.¹⁷⁸ We think contemporary audiences must have been struck by the fact that Faustus makes a contract with the *devil*, but in some respects they may have been more in awe of the fact that the doctor *makes a contract* with the devil. After all, sixteenth-century audiences were familiar with the devil, but a contract was something new to them, and represented a revolutionary force in their day, the power of market exchange to undermine the medieval world. As Jonson does in *Bartholomew Fair*, Marlowe played up his use of legal language on the stage, mesmerizing his audience with what for them was the new hocus-pocus and mumbo-jumbo of contractual relations. Doctor Faustus is a prime

¹⁷⁷See Sir Henry Sumner Maine, *Ancient Law: Its Connection with the Early History of Society and Its Relation to Modern Ideas* (1861; rpt. Buffalo: William S. Hein, 1983), p. 174.

¹⁷⁸I develop this point at length in “The Contract from Hell: Corruption in Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*,” *Private and Public Corruption*, William C. Hefernan and John Kleinig, eds. (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), especially pp. 85–88.

example of the glories and dangers of moving from status to contract. He refuses to accept the status in society into which he was born, and instead contracts with a powerful party to improve his condition and rise in the world. But his new contractual freedom turns out to be the cause of his damnation.

While Marlowe exploits the tragic possibilities created by the new power of contract in the Renaissance, Jonson develops the comic possibilities in his induction to *Bartholomew Fair*.¹⁷⁹ Faustus seeks to rise above his fellow human beings by the power of contract; Jonson as author seeks to effect a reconciliation with his audience by forming a contractual relationship with them.¹⁸⁰ A contract always involves a *quid pro quo*; the audience will give something and Jonson will give something in return:

¹⁷⁹On the importance of the issue of contract in Jonson's day, see Wayne, "Drama and Society," pp. 118–20 and the detailed discussion in Wilson, *Theaters of Intention*, pp. 68–113. As Wayne and Wilson show, many of the fundamental legal issues regarding the status of contracts were being adjudicated in the English courts during Jonson's lifetime.

¹⁸⁰For the importance of this contract in the context of contemporary legal developments, see Wilson, *Theaters of Intention*, pp. 106–13, Craig Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation: The Culture of Credit and Social Relations in Early Modern England* (New York: St. Martin's, 1998), pp. 315–18, and Bruster, *Drama and the Market*, pp. 7–8. For different and more negative interpretations of this contract, see Riggs, *Jonson*, pp. 209–10, Marcus, *Politics of Mirth*, p. 61, Wayne, "Drama and Society," pp. 115–16, McLuskie, "Making and Buying," pp. 137–38, and especially Stallybrass and White, *Transgression*, pp. 69–70. The problem with the Stallybrass and White interpretation is revealed on p. 70, where they confuse the realm of private contracts, freely entered into, with the realm of government warrants, imposed on people from above. For a positive interpretation of the "contract" between Renaissance playwrights and their audience, with regard to *Bartholomew Fair* in particular and Renaissance theater in general, see Agnew, *Worlds Apart*, pp. 110–11, 119–21, and especially p. 11:

The theater not only mimed new social relations within the visible framework of the old: it improvised — as a matter of its own constitutive conventions — a new social contract between itself and its audience, a new set of conditions for the suspension of disbelief that became over time the preconditions of most modern drama.

It is covenanted and agreed, by and between the parties abovesaid, that the said spectators and hearers, as well the curious and envious as the favouring and judicious, as also the grounded judgments and understandings, do for themselves severally covenant and agree, to remain in the places their money or friends have put them in, with patience, for the space of two hours and a half, and somewhat more. In which time the author promiseth to present them, by us, with a new sufficient play called *Bartholomew Fair*, merry, and as full of noise as sport; made to delight all, and to offend none, provided they have either the wit or the honesty to think well of themselves.¹⁸¹

In short, if the audience behaves and pays for their tickets, Jonson contracts to entertain them. But Jonson being Jonson, he is not quite prepared to meet his audience halfway. As the terms of the contract unfold, he is much more detailed about the audience's obligations than his own as author.¹⁸² The contract is very specific about the audience's financial commitments:

It is further agreed that every person here have his or their freewill of censure, to like or dislike at their own charge, the author having now departed with his right it shall be lawful for any man to judge his six pen'orth, his twelve pen'orth, so to his eighteen pence, two shillings, half a crown, to the value of his place, provided always his place get not above his wit. And if he pay for half a dozen, he may censure for all them too, so that he will undertake that they shall be silent.¹⁸³

Jonson insists that the audience's right to criticize him shall be in direct proportion to their exact monetary contribution. Even when he is trying to be reconciled with his audience, he cannot help making fun of their bad taste. He ridicules the fickle opinions of the audience and pays them a dubious compliment:

¹⁸¹*Bartholomew Fair*, Ind., ll. 65–75.

¹⁸²See Haynes, *Social Relations*, pp. 131–35 and Paul Yachnin, *Stage-Wrights: Shakespeare, Jonson, Middleton, and the Making of Theatrical Values* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), p. 88.

¹⁸³*Bartholomew Fair*, Ind., ll. 76–83.

He that will swear, *Jeronimo* or *Andronicus* are the best plays, yet shall pass unexcepted at, here, as a man whose judgement shows it is constant, and hath stood still these five and twenty or thirty years. Though it be an ignorance, it is a virtuous and staid ignorance; and next to truth, a confirmed error does well; such a one the author knows where to find him.¹⁸⁴

Jonson uses the induction to air his many grievances with the London audience, for example, the fact that their taste is hopelessly out-of-date and they fail to keep up with new developments in drama, such as his own plays.

In a swipe at Shakespeare's recent plays, including *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*,¹⁸⁵ Jonson insists that he is above the absurdities other dramatists use to please the crowd:

He is loath to make Nature afraid in his plays, like those that beget Tales, Tempests, and such like drolleries, to mix his head with other men's heels, let the concupiscence of jigs and dances reign as strong as it will amongst you; yet if the puppets will please anybody, they shall be entreated to come in.¹⁸⁶

Even when he is trying to come to terms with his audience, Jonson cannot resist tweaking them and the other playwrights they often prefer to him. But this passage ends on a note of reconciliation, as Jonson promises to please the audience with the lowest form of street entertainment, a puppet show, a promise on which he ultimately delivers. Jonson tries to seal the contract in a spirit of amity with his audience: "In witness whereof, as you have preposterously put to your seals already (which is your money) you will now add the other part of suffrage, your hands."¹⁸⁷ Notice that this contract, in contrast to Faustus's, is sealed with money, not blood. By publicly acknowledging his receipt of the audience's money, Jonson clearly if somewhat grudgingly signals his acceptance of the conditions of the commercial theater.

¹⁸⁴Ibid., Ind., ll. 94-100.

¹⁸⁵For the references to Shakespeare here, see Shapiro, *Rival Playwrights*, pp. 154-56.

¹⁸⁶*Bartholomew Fair*, Ind., ll. 114-19.

¹⁸⁷Ibid., Ind., ll. 135-38.

But the way Jonson chafes under the yoke of his contract with his audience, even as he is proposing and ratifying it, sets an ominous keynote for *Bartholomew Fair*. And indeed, as we have seen, the play in which Jonson expressed his reconciliation with his audience is still highly critical of the commercial theaters. One can imagine the aristocratic audience at the court performance sniggering at the foolish antics of the middle and lower classes, and especially at their taste in theater as evidenced by the puppet show. And yet, as we have seen, Jonson is more critical of authority in the play than he is of the forces authority seeks to control and suppress. It is in fact hard to believe that Jonson got away with his satire on royal authority in the play. At two points, he associates Overdo with James I: when Overdo attacks tobacco, which James himself had done in his *Counterblast to Tobacco*, published in 1604,¹⁸⁸ and when Overdo quotes Horace at the end of the play. In his edition of *Bartholomew Fair*, Gordon Campbell glosses these lines: “possibly intended as a compliment to the king, who had quoted the same words in a speech to parliament in 1609.”¹⁸⁹ But what kind of a compliment is it to James to associate him with an officious fool like Overdo?¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁸See Campbell’s note to ll. 34–35 on p. 509 of his edition.

¹⁸⁹Campbell, *Alchemist*, p. 515.

¹⁹⁰On the matter of the connection between Overdo and James I, Barish, *Prose Comedy*, pp. 319–20, n. 23, details a number of parallels between James’s *Counterblast* and Overdo’s anti-tobacco speech, but Barish “wonders . . . what Jonson’s royal patron thought of this scene.” Horsman, *Bartholomew Fair*, p. xxi, is even more skeptical: “It is tempting to suspect that the attack on tobacco was added to please James I, whose views were known, at the court performance; but this seems ruled out by the uncomplimentary resemblance between James and the Justice.” Sanders, *Theatrical Republics*, pp. 94–95 and Bruster, *Drama and the Market*, pp. 93–94 also discuss the complexities of the parallels between Overdo and James I. See also Wilson, *Theaters of Intention*, p. 133. For an extensive attempt to trace the presence of James I in *Bartholomew Fair*, see Marcus, *Politics of Mirth*, pp. 38–63. Viewing Jonson as hoping to create an alliance with the king against civic authorities in London who were trying to shut down the theaters, Marcus argues that *Bartholomew Fair* is a “lucid and elegant defense of royal prerogative” (p. 40). Although Marcus’s interpretation is ingenious, and she is able to offer a good deal of historical evidence for it, it ultimately strikes me as unconvincing. She is too prone to judge James by his words rather than his deeds,

Jonson could have defended himself by saying that in the person of Overdo, he was making fun only of incompetent rulers. But he does not make it clear in what ways Overdo's intrusions in the marketplace differ from the policies of James and other British monarchs. No wonder Jonson added to his contract with the audience a stipulation that no one was to find any political satire in *Bartholomew Fair*¹⁹¹:

In consideration of which, it is finally agreed by the foresaid hearers and spectators that they neither in themselves conceal, nor suffer by them to be concealed, any state-decipherer, or politic picklock of the scene, so solemnly ridiculous as to search out who was meant by the gingerbread-woman, who by the hobby-horse-man, who by the costermonger, nay, who by their wares. Or that will pretend to affirm, on his own inspired ignorance, what Mirror of Magistrates is meant by the Justice, what great lady by the pig-woman, what concealed statesman by the seller of mousetraps, and so of the rest.¹⁹²

As a result of state-decipherers, Jonson had already gone to prison for offending the monarch in *The Isle of Dogs* and *Eastward Ho*.¹⁹³ He was not about to make the same mistake again, and thus disingenuously denies any hidden political messages in his play.¹⁹⁴ Nevertheless, *Bartholomew Fair* provides a powerful critique of all those, including the king, who seek to meddle with the free working of the marketplace.

and I find it hard to believe that Jonson would have agreed with Marcus that James "is the only man in England who is not merely a man, who is able to see from a more than human perspective" (p. 60). Even Marcus is puzzled by the parallels Jonson appears to create between Overdo and James, and her attempt to turn the point in her favor seems forced: "If James did see himself in Jonson's portrayal of Overdo, however, that recognition would help to mitigate the force of the resemblance" (p. 55). I suspect that if "James did see himself in Jonson's portrayal of Overdo," Jonson might have made another one of his periodic trips to jail.

¹⁹¹See Slights, *Art of Secrecy*, pp. 145–46.

¹⁹²*Bartholomew Fair*, Ind., ll. 120–29.

¹⁹³See Riggs, *Jonson*, pp. 34, 41 and Slights, *Art of Secrecy*, p. 146.

¹⁹⁴See Slights, *Art of Secrecy*, pp. 169–70.

Bartholomew Fair is thus a remarkably complex achievement. In many ways, the play is the culmination of Jonson's satire on commercial society in general and the commercial theater in particular. But Jonson uses his satire of the business world to divert the attention of his royal and aristocratic audience away from his more fundamental and pointed political satire. In *Bartholomew Fair* the marketplace comes to stand for freedom, and attempts to regulate it represent oppression.¹⁹⁵ Above all, Jonson seems to celebrate the energy of the marketplace. However chaotic it may appear, however shady the practices of its participants may be, *Bartholomew Fair* provokes the reaction: "here is life." Ultimately, the fair simply reflects the desires of the consumers who flock to it. Those who try to regulate the fair are trying to restrain desire and in that sense to impoverish life; those who hawk their wares at the fair are only answering to the call of human desire in all its vitality: "What do you lack? What do you buy, pretty mistress? A fine hobby-horse to make your son a tilter? A drum to make him a soldier? A fiddle to make him a reveller? What is't you lack? Little dogs for your daughters? Or babies, male or female?"¹⁹⁶

Spurred by his recognition that the marketplace cannot be all bad if the theater is part of the marketplace, Jonson develops his understanding of what a free economy can accomplish.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁵For a contrary view, see Marcus, *Politics of Mirth*, who, in her unquestioning support for the royal authority of James I, looks at the world of Jonson's play and concludes that it is under-regulated: "*Bartholomew Fair* has suffered from a vacuum of authority" (p. 59).

¹⁹⁶*Bartholomew Fair*, III.ii.31–34.

¹⁹⁷Even when Jonson was pointedly criticizing commercial society in *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*, he could not help betraying a secret sympathy for the marketplace. Jonson creates vivid portraits of his comic villains in these plays and pallid portraits of the good characters. The reason is that villains such as *Volpone* and *Mosca* or *Face* and *Subtle* embody all the comic energy in these plays, whereas the morally good characters, such as *Celia* and *Bonario* in *Volpone*, lack the force of desire and become boring by comparison. On this point, see Haynes, *Social Relations*, p. 128 and Charisse Gendron, "The Expanding License of Jonson's Comedies: *Volpone*, *The Alchemist*, and *Bartholomew Fair*," *Jacobean Miscellany* 95, no. 3 (1983): 20–21. In these earlier plays the villains are far more interesting as dramatic conceptions than the good characters, and the plays would fall flat without them. On this

Bartholomew Fair reveals all the forces that were soon to tear Britain apart in the Civil War of the 1640s: class conflict, fanatical religious belief, aristocratic and royal pretension, the overzealous exercise of authority. And yet Jonson shows that the marketplace is capable of containing and even taming all these divisive forces, if only by offering the satisfaction of desire as an alternative to the exercise of moral indignation.¹⁹⁸ The economic dealings that the religious and political figures in the play scorn turn out to supply a broader and more secure foundation for social harmony than any principle offered by church or state. In a remarkable anticipation of later economic thinking and Enlightenment ideas in general, Jonson seems to pin his hopes on the middle class and its devotion to commerce to achieve political stability and above all the moderation of the excesses of religious and royal absolutism. Whatever one may say against it, the marketplace as Jonson presents it is a force for social peace in *Bartholomew Fair* and by bringing people together, the theater contributes to this harmony. No one person runs Bartholomew Fair, and yet like any market it produces an order of its own.

point, see Barish, *Antitheatrical Prejudice*, pp. 146, 153–54. In *The Alchemist*, Jonson is already moving in the direction of *Bartholomew Fair*; at the end, the ostensibly good character Lovewit is willing to appropriate the ill-gotten gains of Face and Subtle, as if the playwright were already recognizing that the morally questionable energies of the commercial world must somehow be incorporated into polite society. See Riggs, *Jonson*, p. 174 for the controversy over Jonson's attitude toward Lovewit. Gendron in "Expanding License" (pp. 5–31) does a good job of tracing the movement from *The Alchemist* to *Bartholomew Fair*. See also Wayne, "Drama and Society," pp. 111–14. In sum, I am not claiming in this essay to settle the complicated issue of the place of *Bartholomew Fair* within Jonson's whole career. There are signs that Jonson's sympathy for the free market began to surface in his earlier plays; by the same token, I would not claim that *Bartholomew Fair* permanently altered Jonson's attitude toward the marketplace. His doubts resurface in later plays, such as *The Devil Is An Ass*. All I am arguing here is that *Bartholomew Fair* is Jonson's most cogent and thoroughgoing defense of the marketplace.

¹⁹⁸See Wayne, "Drama and Society," p. 104: "in *Bartholomew Fair* there is an unmistakable tension between, on the one hand, the traditional moral doctrine of social obligation according to status, and, on the other, the more modern principles of rational self-interest and voluntary contractual obligation." See also pp. 122–23, 126.

With Jonson's brilliant intuition of the principle of spontaneous order, he manages to shape a dramatic form appropriate to the apparent chaos of the market. By normal Renaissance standards, especially by the strict standard of Jonson's earlier neoclassically ordered plays, *Bartholomew Fair* looks formless and disorganized. The play simply sprawls on the stage, like the fair itself, coming to life before our eyes and following no apparent plan. In fact Jonson seems deliberately to resist any centralizing vision of order in the play. Characters who, like Busy and Overdo, seek to direct the action from some kind of central command post are defeated in the course of the play. The action seems to spill over every attempt to contain it, like Ursula the Pig-Woman's ample frame itself: "Did not I bid you should get this chair let out o' the sides for me, that my hips might play?"¹⁹⁹

Of course, the formlessness of *Bartholomew Fair* is only an illusion. As we have seen, the play in fact obeys the classical unities of time and place as well as any of Jonson's earlier triumphs of neoclassical form. But that is just the point: in *Bartholomew Fair* Jonson creates a dramatic example of order in disorder that mimics the marketplace itself. The play does not appear to follow any central plan, but in the end we see that it forms an ordered whole. Jonson satirizes the attempts of religious and political authorities to impose their laws upon the freedom of the marketplace and the theater. But that does not mean that he portrays the marketplace and the theater as fundamentally lawless. On the contrary, he suggests that the economic and theatrical realms may develop laws of their own and prove to be self-regulating if left alone by outside religious and political forces. Jonson could not have foreseen the full development of the concept of spontaneous order in Austrian economics. And yet in *Bartholomew Fair* he took a major step in that direction with his recognition that both the marketplace and the theater might prove to be lawful in their own ways without careful regulation by church and state.

¹⁹⁹*Bartholomew Fair*, II.ii.62-64.