

SHAKESPEARE LECTURE

THE FIRST WEST END COMEDY

By EMRYS JONES

Read 22 April 1982

I

MOST people, I imagine, would agree that West End comedy has become a thing of the past, perhaps not wholly extinct, but coming to seem somewhat antiquated.¹ It is no longer contemporary with ourselves, so that even the latest specimens of the kind now strike us as period-pieces. They are the products of an age whose social assumptions we can more and more easily regard with detachment. For several months last year Noel Coward's *Present Laughter* was running at the Vaudeville Theatre in the Strand. This play (written in 1939 but not acted until 1943) is not perhaps one of his best, and I am not claiming for it any special distinction. But one feature seemed to me of interest from the point of view of dramatic history. This is its opening scene. The action is set in the London home—the 'studio'—of a successful West End actor, a matinée idol in his early forties, someone whose public image was not (when it was first acted) too far removed from that of the play's author. The play opens at morning ('about 10.30 a.m.', says the stage direction in the published text), with the famous actor still in bed offstage. The members of his household arrive one by one and prepare for the day's business—his housekeeper-cook, his valet, his loyal secretary, and later his still friendly former wife. And then finally, from his bedroom, wearing a flamboyant Chinese-looking dressing-gown, the actor himself emerges—to have breakfast, to engage in non-stop conversation, and to get on with the play.

The scene belongs to a familiar prototype. One might call it the levee of the man of fashion. It has a certain classic formality; it makes a variation on a well-known theme, and as such seems to echo any number of such scenes from earlier plays, so that when we see it we instantly know where we are. And indeed Noel

¹ In this 'Shakespeare Lecture' I am taking advantage of the terms laid down by the founder, which allow the lecturer to speak either on Shakespeare or on 'some problem in English dramatic literature and histrionic art'.

Coward's scene comes at the end of a long line of such scenes, and it is these that I want to use as a way of designating a whole tradition of English stage comedy.

Essential to this morning situation is the young, or at any rate not elderly, hero, who lives in a fashionable part of London. He is attended by servants and sought after by persons of his own class, so that the scene invariably develops into a succession of visits. He is not burdened with responsibilities; he is not subject to the harsher forms of economic pressure (though he may often be in need of ready cash); he lives largely for his own pleasure. For us probably, such a scene will have Edwardian or late Victorian associations: we think of Somerset Maugham or, earlier, Wilde. But I want to suggest that the form of the scene, as well as the social way of life it dramatizes, can be traced back much further. They can be traced back to Victorian novels of fashionable life which exploited the forms of stage comedy (Thackeray, Bulwer-Lytton), and back further still to Georgian and Restoration comedy, in the last of which such opening morning scenes receive their fullest development: as, notably, in Congreve's *Love for Love* (1695) and Etherege's *Man of Mode* (1676). The first act of *The Man of Mode* is without doubt the most resplendent and charismatic instance of the kind in English drama. But Dorimant's levee, first staged over three hundred years ago, is still not the first of the line. We can go even further back, over sixty years before. And it is with its chief Jacobean forerunner that the line we have traced back from *Present Laughter* comes to an end. Ben Jonson's *Epicoene, or The Silent Woman*, first acted in 1609, is the earliest English play to open with a London levee scene of the kind I have described. More significantly, we can say of it, in retrospect, that it inaugurated a tradition of comedy which, in terms of historical duration, has been overwhelmingly the dominant one until recent years.

Epicoene was the first of Jonson's plays to be set throughout in London. Of course there had been earlier London comedies. But such plays as Dekker's *Shoemaker's Holiday* (written ten years before, in 1599) were set in the City of London and celebrated the City within the walls, the City of the Livery Companies and the craftsmen. *Epicoene*, on the other hand, opens in the fashionable lodging of a young gallant called Clerimont. The first stage direction indicates the time of day: 'He comes out making himself ready' (i.e. dressing himself).¹ But it does more than that: it signals that we are in a certain social world, a world of confident privacy and leisure.

¹ Quotations from *Epicoene* are from the New Mermaids edition (1979) by R. V. Holdsworth.

Clerimont is attended by a servant, and is no doubt dressing himself in an appropriately fashionable style. Everything that he says, does, and looks proclaims his social position. He is completely free and idle, a gentleman who can afford to do nothing but pursue his own pleasure. He speaks with what is presumably the Jacobean equivalent of a fashionable drawl; and Jonson's text is careful to make him slur his words for this his first utterance: 'Ha' you got the song I ga' you, boy?' The boy warns him not to let anyone else hear the song he has composed. 'Why, I pray?' 'It will get you the dangerous name of a poet in town, sir.' The precocious boy speaks in his master's modish voice: to make a distinction that was already becoming well established, we are not in the city, we are 'in town'.

For its date, this opening scene of *Epicoene* will now strike anyone as startlingly modern. It seems to anticipate by half a century Restoration comedy. Of course to say that the whole play anticipates Restoration comedy is a cliché of literary history, but if it is a truth, then this opening scene must be largely responsible. There are other 'Restoration' features in *Epicoene*; but given no more than this witty, stylish opening, one can see why this play should have been the first to be acted after the Restoration and why Dryden should have chosen it as the subject of his 'Examen' in his *Essay of Dramatic Poesy*. From a post-Restoration point of view, *Epicoene* stood out as showing what 'the former age' could achieve in comedy, and in a mode moreover which seemed peculiarly congenial to a fashionable audience over fifty years after it was written.

If we ourselves find the opening of *Epicoene* surprisingly modern for its period, then it must be in part because our sense of that period is at fault. However novel some of the play's features were at the time, the play itself cannot be anachronistic; what is mistaken is the concept, the half-conscious picture, of the Jacobean age which perhaps most of us carry in our heads. In what follows I shall be looking first at some of the play's historical contexts, social and theatrical, before returning to *Epicoene* and the tradition which it helped to bring into being. Indeed I shall be as much concerned with the idea of the West End and the tradition of West End comedy as with the play *Epicoene* itself.

II

Of course the term 'West End' is, strictly speaking, itself anachronistic when applied to a play written only half a dozen years after the death of Queen Elizabeth. The West End as we

know it had not yet come into being. Apart from St. James's Palace and a sprinkling of other buildings, the area to the west and north of Charing Cross that we now think of as the West End was still open fields. Looking at a map of the area drawn in the mid seventeenth century, we can pick out one or two anticipations of what was to come. The name 'Piccadilly' itself is Jacobean, though the earliest recorded instances are a little later than *Epicoene*; but Jonson may well have known the name. An even earlier plan of the Piccadilly area, drawn in 1585, shows the actual windmill on the site of what later became Windmill Street, later still (much later) to be associated with the Windmill Theatre, whose proud motto during the Second World War blitz was 'We never closed'.¹ But our West End is essentially a product of the Restoration.

Nonetheless there was of course an extensive and, in terms of its impact on London life, immensely important development west of the City during the half-century before the Civil War. The Elizabethan City of London was grossly over-populated for its geographical size, despite the efforts of successive governments to check its growth; it was bursting out in all directions. Like all medieval cities, London until the sixteenth century did not enforce any clear segregation of the social classes: rich and poor, courtiers and tradesmen, lived in what would later have been thought unseemly proximity.² Yet the signs of social segregation were already there in the late sixteenth century, and were to become more and more clear during the century that followed. 'The dominant fact in the development of London, from the time of Elizabeth', says one historian, 'has been the cleavage between the East and West.'³ Certainly, the westward movement of the fashionable classes, already perceptible in the last decade of Elizabeth's reign, was acquiring more momentum throughout the reign of her successor. The magnetic force which decided that this movement was to be westward and not in any other direction was primarily the presence of the Court in Westminster—for the fact that the country's capital was not one city but two (with trade and wealth in the City of London, law and government in Westminster)

¹ C. L. Kingsford, *The Early History of Piccadilly, Leicester Square and Soho* (Cambridge, 1925).

² Valerie Pearl, 'Change and Stability in Seventeenth-Century London', *London Journal* v (1979), 7.

³ M. Dorothy George, *London Life in the Eighteenth Century* (1925; 1966 reprint), p. 75. See also M. J. Power, 'The East and West in Early-Modern London', in *Wealth and Power in Tudor England* (1978), ed. E. W. Ives, R. J. Knecht, and J. J. Scarisbrick.

was from at least the fourteenth century fundamental to life in London.¹ The City had no choice but to grow in that direction, since it was from there that power and influence emanated. But as well as the Court, the presence of so many great palaces on the south side of the Strand was a strong incentive to the ambitious to live close at hand. It helped too that legal business was centred on the west side of the City, where the Inns of Court were, within easy reach of Westminster Hall, where cases were heard. Indeed from at least the 1590s onwards, and no doubt from some time previously, the Strand was the most sought-after address in the whole of London. And since the Strand will figure prominently in what follows, I must say something about this once celebrated thoroughfare.

With the exception of its two beautiful island-sited churches (and perhaps Somerset House), the Strand today is no longer an exceptionally distinguished street, and has little in it to detain anyone. Despite the resonance which still clings to its name, few people will now think of it as London's main street. It is becoming just a characterless urban chasm, a mere link-road between West End and City. Yet something survives—its geographical placement, its length, its width—even if hardly a single building known to Ben Jonson still stands. Cities are to some extent a matter of psychic space, of distances and directions, the lay-out intimately known through the effort needed to traverse it on foot and through the vistas registered repeatedly by the eye. In this sense something important of Jonson's London remains. And for my purposes it is essential to insist that our London grew by degrees out of his and that his London persists—perceptibly, if not wholly visibly—into ours.

Unfortunately we have no pictorial record of the Jacobean Strand. Perhaps the closest we can get is a print of Wenceslaus Hollar's of about 1660 or just before, too late to convey the authentic Jacobean feeling, but giving some sense of what the area was like in late Caroline and Commonwealth times.² We can peer down, at a steep angle, as if from a helicopter, into the quite wide

¹ T. F. Tout, 'The Beginnings of a Modern Capital—London and Westminster in the Fourteenth Century', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 1923.

² I am grateful to Mr. H. M. Colvin for drawing my attention to this print. A detail of it is reproduced in *The History of the King's Works* (General Editor, H. M. Colvin), iii, 1485–1660 (*Part 1*) (1975), pl. 12. There are some evocative nineteenth-century photographs of streets and houses dating from early Stuart times (mostly demolished before 1900) in Graham Bush's *Old London: Photographed by Henry Dixon and Alfred and John Bool* (1975); see especially pl. 110, 'Old houses in the Strand'.

street, noting the tall gabled buildings on the north side, three or four storeys high. On the south side are the great palaces, over on the right Arundel House (a recent addition), then Somerset House, and then the Savoy, laid out like Oxbridge colleges, with gatehouses fronting the Strand and, within, buildings disposed round quadrangles or courts, and parterred gardens running down to the Thames.

From the Elizabethan to the Caroline period, the Strand and its immediate environs were subjected to an intense pressure from those seeking accommodation. To judge from the writings of the time, everyone of standing, and anyone ambitious for standing, wanted to live in the Strand. So in his prose work *Father Hubbard's Tale* (1604), Middleton tells the story of the young student coming up to London: 'The Lawyer . . . embraced our young gentleman (I think, for a fool), and gave him many riotous instructions how to carry himself . . . told him he must acquaint himself with many gallants of the Inns-of-Court, and keep rank with those that spend most, always wearing a bountiful disposition about him, lofty and liberal; his lodging must be about the Strand, in any case, being remote from the handicraft scent of the city . . .' The 'handicraft scent' was on the other side of the City of London, towards the east. He goes on later: ' . . . up again we trotted to London, in a great frost, I remember, for the ground was as hard as a lawyer's conscience; and arriving at the luxurious Strand, some three days before the term, we inquired for our bountiful landlord, or the fool in the full, at his neat and curious lodging . . .'¹ As this and other such passages suggest, part of the pressure for lodgings came from the floating student population of the Inns of Court, all of which were near the Strand. John Donne, for example, was at Lincoln's Inn in the 1590s; when a few years later, in February 1602, he wrote a letter to his new and outraged father-in-law shortly after he had eloped with his daughter, he was careful to add his unimpeachable west London address: 'From my lodging by the Savoy'. Naturally the best-appointed and best-positioned lodgings went to those most able to pay for them, and some were willing to pay a lot. In Brome's comedy *The Court Beggar* (1632), a knight is scolded by his daughter for having sold his entire country estate: ' . . . a fair mansion house, / Large fruitful fields, rich meadows and sweet pastures, / Well cropp'd with corn and stock'd as well with

¹ *Works* (1886), ed. A. H. Bullen, viii. pp. 76-7, 81. See Ann Jennalie Cook, *The Privileged Playgoers of Shakespeare's London 1576-1642* (Princeton, 1981), pp. 81-6, for a brief account of lodgings in London in this period.

cattle, / A park well stor'd with deer, too, and fish ponds in't, / And all this for a lodging in the Strand. . . .'¹ No doubt Brome is exaggerating, but his satire must have had some point. One catches glimpses not only of the scramble for rooms but of the lodgings trade from the point of view of the landladies. When Middleton's unscrupulous couple the Allwits (in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*) come into some unexpected money, Mrs Allwit at once knows what to do with it: 'Let's let out lodgings then, / And take a house in the Strand'. It was not until the troubles of the forties that these prosperous room-letters met their downfall: 'In 1642 the people in the Strand, who chiefly lived by letting lodgings, were in despair, having to pawn their furniture in order to pay the rent, their lodgings being all empty.'² For the first time in over fifty years perhaps, it was easy to get a lodging in the Strand. After the Civil War, the Strand was never to recover its social pre-eminence.³

Clerimont's lodging in *Epicoene* is not actually in the Strand, although Sir Amorous La Foole pronounces it 'a fine lodging, almost as delicate a lodging as mine.' 'Not so, sir', protests Clerimont. 'Excuse me', Sir Amorous insists, 'if it were i' the Strand, I assure you.' Precisely where Clerimont lives we are not told; but it is clearly not far from the most desired thoroughfare, where Sir Amorous himself lives. Indeed just before Sir Amorous makes his first appearance, Clerimont describes him in terms of his town address: 'He does give plays and suppers, and invites his guests to 'em aloud out of his window as they ride by in coaches. He has a lodging in the Strand for the purpose, or to watch when ladies are gone to the china-houses or the Exchange, that he may meet 'em by chance and give 'em presents . . .' In fact Sir Amorous is a typical Strand character, just as *Epicoene* itself is the first play to deal directly with the Strand social world.⁴

¹ Quoted by C. V. Wedgwood, 'Comedy in the Reign of Charles I', in *Studies in Social History* (1955), ed. J. H. Plumb, p. 129; reprinted in C. V. Wedgwood, *Truth and Opinion* (1960).

² Sir Walter Besant, *London in the Time of the Stuarts* (1903), p. 55.

³ Lawrence Stone, 'The Residential Development of the West End of London in the Seventeenth Century', in *After the Reformation* (Manchester, 1980), ed. Barbara C. Malament, p. 194: 'The combination of a rush of nobles, courtiers, and officials back to the revived Restoration Court, and the decay of the old residential area in or near the Strand created an acute shortage of upper-class housing in the early 1660s.'

⁴ Cf. Shirley's comedy *The Lady of Pleasure* (acted 1635). Whereas *Epicoene* gave its scene as 'London', Shirley's play states 'Scene: The Strand'. In the

Given this pressure for fashionable accommodation, the moment was more than ripe when the Earl of Bedford made his decisive move to employ Inigo Jones to lay out the Piazza at Covent Garden with fashionable houses of an altogether new neoclassical design. This was the moment (in the 1630s) which marks the creation of the 'inner West End'—to borrow a phrase from Sir John Summerson.¹ This is not the Piccadilly and St. James's Square West End but the West End which centred on the Strand and the new district now to be known as Covent Garden. (Even today, when we go to the Royal Opera House and the theatres in and around Drury Lane, the Aldwych, and the Strand, we still think of this area as being in some sense 'West End', despite its isolation from the more obviously fashionable residential parts of the other 'outer' West End of St. James's and Mayfair.) Indeed one might trace back the beginnings of this 'inner West End' further still, to 1609, when the Earl of Salisbury founded the New Exchange on the south side of the Strand. The New Exchange was an upper-class shopping centre, which set out deliberately to compete with the older-established shopping centres in the City—and as such it epitomizes the incipient West End movement already well under way during the opening years of James I's reign.² This very year—1609—that saw the New Exchange founded also saw *Epicoene* performed.

In some ways perhaps we need to revise our mental picture of the Jacobean period. Literary and dramatic historians still see the seventeenth century too much in terms of contrasts and discontinuities, of before and after the Civil War. And one tendency

opening scene Celestina announces 'I live i'th' Strand', and elaborates a fantasy of what she will see from her window:

'The horses shall be taught with frequent waiting
Upon my gates to stop in their career
Toward Charing Cross, spite of the coachman's fury;
And not a tilter but shall strike his plume
When he sails by my window. My balcony
Shall be the courtier's idol, and more gaz'd at
Than all the pageantry at Temple Bar
By country clients . . .'

(*Six Caroline Plays* (Oxford, 1962), ed. A. S. Knowland, p. 18).

¹ *Georgian London* (1945), p. 5.

² For the New Exchange, see Lawrence Stone, *Family and Fortune* (Oxford, 1973), pp. 95–109. A design for the New Exchange by Inigo Jones has survived, though whether, or to what extent, the builders actually made use of it is not known. See Sir John Summerson, *Architecture in Britain 1530–1830* (Harmondsworth, 1953; 1970 reprint), p. 115.

especially prevalent is to postdate the occurrence of what are thought of as 'Restoration' developments and so to under-estimate the extent to which some practices usually associated with the age of Charles II were already flourishing in late or even early Jacobean society. As far as the fashionable life of London is concerned, an essay by the economic historian F. J. Fisher, published in the 1940s, remains of fundamental importance.¹ Professor Fisher makes it clear that, during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, there was a large influx into London of landed gentlemen and their families, partly in order to supervise more closely their legal business, partly to live more cheaply in lodgings than they could on their country estates, and partly simply to enjoy a more interesting, or more exciting, certainly less tedious, social round than they would at home. 'By the early seventeenth century, there had developed a clearly defined London season which began in the autumn, reached its climax at Christmas, and was over by June.' This 'seasonal influx of thousands of visitors' put an unprecedented strain on London's accommodation and transport, as well as on the catering trades:

By the early seventeenth century, therefore, the economy of London and its suburbs was called upon to adapt itself to a substantial seasonal immigration of rural landowners, many of them accompanied by their families. It had to accommodate itself to an ever-changing and steadily growing student body which had already, under Elizabeth, exceeded a thousand. It had to absorb an uncertain but not inconsiderable number who, from either poverty or choice, from either boredom or ambition, had abandoned their country seats for permanent residence in town. The incomes of those immigrants no doubt varied, but their total revenues must have been considerable. The result of their expenditure was to create a series of demands which it became an important function of the metropolis to fulfil. . . . From that tendency towards conspicuous consumption the luxury trades of the city waxed fat. As in all ages, the gentleman come to town required transport, and it was during the early seventeenth century that the coach became a familiar part of the London scene. By the reign of Charles I, not only were hackney coaches to be found in their hundreds, but the cab rank had become an institution and the sedan chair was ceasing to be a curiosity.²

¹ 'The Development of London as a Centre of Conspicuous Consumption in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Fourth Series, xxx (1948), reprinted in *Essays in Economic History*, ed. E. M. Carus-Wilson (1962). ii. 197-207, to which references are given. See also Lawrence Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy 1558-1641* (Oxford, 1965), pp. 547-86.

² Fisher, p. 204. Cf. Brome's comedy *The Sparagus Garden* (1633) for its

These wealthy, eager-to-spend newcomers to the fashionable London scene wanted not only accommodation, eating and drinking places, transport; they also wanted recreation, amusement, formal entertainments. Clubs were already being formed in this early period; and by the reign of James I, observes Fisher, 'the gentry were already manifesting that taste for parks and pleasure-gardens that one normally associates with a later age.' Taking coach-rides in Hyde Park was a fashionable diversion by the second half of James I's reign. And above all, says Fisher, 'there was the theatre. Lord Keynes is reported once to have said that England obtained Shakespeare when she could afford him. Presumably his meaning was that Shakespeare could flourish only in a commercial theatre, and that a commercial theatre could flourish only when there was sufficient surplus wealth to pay for it. If that argument is valid, then perhaps the urbanised and semi-urbanised gentry of Elizabeth and the early Stuarts may claim at least some share of reflected glory, for it was their demand for entertainment that helped to bring the commercial theatre into being.' The way of life which these pleasure-seeking visitors, or rather immigrants, to London adopted would, says Professor Fisher, 'have seemed familiar to the eighteenth century. It would have been incomprehensible to the fifteenth.'¹

There is one further aspect of London's transformation into the city known to Dryden, Pope, and Dr Johnson, and with it I return to what I was saying earlier. This is the new style in English, and more particularly London's, architecture as we see it embodied in the work of Inigo Jones. We think of Inigo Jones as Ben Jonson's personal rival and even enemy; but in a longer perspective we should perhaps see him as also his ally in the task of heaving England into a new cultural era. Inigo Jones's contribution to the physical fabric of the West End consisted of two major undertakings. The first was the Covent Garden Piazza and his magnificent church of St. Paul's—the first West End square and the first West End church. The other was the terrace of houses in the

reference to litters with clearly marked numbers on them like modern buses: *Brittleware*: 'I pray gentlemen which way took she.' *Samuel*: 'Downe towards the Strand I tell you, in a new Litter, with the number one and twenty in the breech on't.' (*Dramatic Works* (1873), iii. 197).

¹ Fisher, p. 204. Cf. Peter Clark and Peter Slack, *English Towns in Transition 1500–1700* (Oxford, 1976), p. 74: 'From the 1650's the old respectable drinking establishments, inns and taverns, faced competition from new houses selling cocoa, tea, and above all coffee . . . but not less important was the social pressure for more exclusive meeting places for the greater merchants and landed classes. Here the élite might talk business and politics, and read the latest newspapers.'

Italian taste he designed for Lincoln's Inn Fields. This row of houses has a peculiar importance, for in it he established the prototype of what was to become the London town house.¹ The pattern fixed by Inigo Jones—town house, terrace, and square—was to last for more than two centuries. In this respect Inigo Jones and Ben Jonson both inaugurated extraordinarily long-lasting traditions—in the one case of the gentleman's town house, in the other of what one might call the gentleman's town comedy. For West End comedy—that is to say, Jacobean West End comedy—came into being just as the West End was itself coming into being. They are both aspects of the same comprehensive social process. Jonson, like Inigo Jones, stands at the beginning of the new age.

III

A certain degree of social exclusiveness was common to both these developments, architectural and dramatic. But the full extent of the movement was not to be seen until after the Restoration. It was to result in a rift dividing the city which from then until the mid twentieth century was to be central to the way Londoners themselves regarded London. From the seventeenth century onwards London was to be divided into two social worlds.

In 1662 Henry Jermyn, Earl of St. Albans, obtained from Charles II a lease of Pall Mall Field, and he soon planned to build houses there 'fit for the dwellings of noblemen and gentlemen of quality'. 'In laying out his estate the founder of the West End of London, for so Henry Jermyn deserves to be designated, reserved a central site for the great piazza.'² This square—St. James's Square—was the first of the great West End squares west of Charing Cross, and was even more socially exclusive than Inigo Jones's Piazza. And with it the West End, in the full modern sense of the term, comes into existence.³

Not only the locality came into existence at about this time but the name. The *OED* does not record 'West End' before 1807; according to this authority, the term belongs to the age of Byron. But this is very misleading. The term 'West End' is undoubtedly seventeenth-century in origin, although it is found at first only in what might be called technical contexts. A rate book of 1667 refers to a house in 'Jarman Street, West End, North Side'.⁴ Though the

¹ Summerson, *Georgian London*, pp. 17–19.

² A. I. Dasent, *The History of St. James's Square and the Foundation of the West End of London* (1895), p. 5.

³ Norman G. Brett-James, *The Growth of Stuart London* (1935), pp. 366–99.

⁴ Dasent, p. 8.

exact meaning of the term here is not clear, it evidently refers to a part of the St. James's locality. There is an even earlier usage. In Sir William Petty's influential *Treatise of Taxation* (1662) occurs a passage in which he mentions the movement west of London's inhabitants: 'I say in the case of *London* it must be Westward, because the Winds blowing near 3 fourths of the year from the West, the dwellings of the West end are so much more free from the fumes, steams & stinks of the whole Easterly Pyle; which when Sea coal is burnt is a great matter' (1689 edn., p. 22).¹ If Petty could casually use the term in 1662, it is probably pre-Restoration in origin. Once the term 'West End' became established, whenever that was, 'East End' must eventually have followed. For 'East End' the *OED* records no instance earlier than 1883, yet the following passage was translated into English in the 1790s: 'the east end, especially along the shore of the Thames, consists of old houses, the streets there are narrow, dark and ill-paved; . . . The Contrast between this and the West end is astonishing: the houses here are mostly new and elegant; the squares are superb, the streets straight and open . . .'² Both these passages, but especially the second, testify to the growing sense of contrast between east and west London. As the West End became more splendid, so the East End became more wretched and sordid. Certainly by the time Archenholz wrote his book, the principle of social segregation had been fully accepted and, as his words suggest, even shockingly so. Two recent urban historians sum up the continuing situation: 'The development of the West End for the nation's ruling élite underlined the great extremes of wealth and the growing social segregation within greater London. Complementing the great

¹ This shows that the term 'West End' precedes the St. James's Square project, contrary to what Dasent seems to have thought. Petty's sentence is quoted in Charles Wilson, *England's Apprenticeship 1603-1763* (1965; 1975 reprint), p. 47, where it is attributed, without a precise reference given, to Evelyn. I am grateful to Dr E. S. de Beer for answering queries about Evelyn and to Dr Paul Slack for correctly locating the sentence for me.

² J. W. von Archenholz, *A Picture of England* (1797); quoted by M. Dorothy George, *London Life in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 76. Another passage from Archenholz brings out a different kind of London contrast: 'The shops are open by eight o'clock every morning in the city; all is then in motion, every body is at work; while on the other hand, at the *court end* of the town, the streets are empty, the houses shut, and even the very domestics are asleep; the sound of coaches is not heard, and one seems to walk about in a place that has been deserted. . . . Those in the city charge the people who live at the west end of the town with luxury, idleness, effeminacy, and an attachment to French fashions; while the others speak of a citizen as a dull, fat animal, who places all his merits in his strong box.' (I quote this from the Dublin 1791 edition, p. 79.)

households with their income of three thousand pounds a year or more were the migrant labourers and sea-men concentrated in the East End, living on a few shillings a month.¹ The process which was decisively begun in Charles I's reign was to continue for the following two hundred years, culminating in the building of Belgravia, the grandest and most palatial of all London's residential areas, and undertaken as the immediate consequence of the conversion in the 1820s of Buckingham House into Buckingham Palace.

Despite a few scattered pre-nineteenth-century occurrences of 'West End', it is undeniable that most people in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries used other terms to express their strong sense of London's east-west axis. The terms most often favoured were simple directional ones—'this end of the town', 'the further end of the town', 'the other end of the town'. (The last mentioned has persisted until the present day: East End people still use the phrase 'the other end' for the West End: 'I'm going up the other end' is still a common expression.) Such expressions are frequent in Restoration comedy: Wycherley uses 'this end of the town' twice in the opening twenty lines of *The Country Wife*, while Aphra Behn even uses such a phrase adjectivally: '[She] is grown a very t'other-end-of-the-Town Creature'.² In his description of London, Defoe more than once refers to 'the Court end of the town', and variants on this, like 'the fashionable end of the town', are common.³ The point to be made is that in the course of the seventeenth century Londoners became highly conscious of this polarity, and while expressions of this east-west sense are much more frequent after the Restoration, instances can also be found much earlier in Jacobean writing. This east-west opposition is not to be confused with the more overtly political opposition which was traditional between Court and City. It is much more a matter of social topography, of what recent geographers call 'mental mapping', which involves the highly subjective ways in which people may experience in their own minds the shapes of the public places they inhabit.⁴ In the early seventeenth century, before even the Covent Garden 'inner West End' had been laid out, this east-

¹ Clark and Slack, *English Towns in Transition*, p. 69.

² Quoted by David Cook and John Swannell in their Revels edition of *The Country Wife* (1975), p. 9.

³ Daniel Defoe, *A Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain* (Harmondsworth, 1971), ed. Pat Rogers, pp. 308, 323.

⁴ See Peter Gould and Rodney White, *Mental Maps* (Harmondsworth, 1974).

west sense was no doubt by later standards only incipient, though it was already there—as, for example, in the passage already quoted from Middleton, with its reference to the Strand's being 'remote from the handicraft scent of the city'.

For the following three hundred years, however, the two Londons were something which ordinary Londoners must have taken utterly for granted. Certainly by the late nineteenth century it was a natural fact of life, reinforced by subliminal notions of ascent and descent which are still operative, perhaps on the analogy of such expressions as 'going up to town' and 'down to the country': hence colloquialisms like 'going up the West End', 'going down the East End'. The modern growth of Greater London into the western suburbs has not obliterated the old directional expressions so that even those who live west of Hyde Park and who therefore have to travel in an easterly direction to get to the centre still talk of 'going up into the West End'. The dramatist John Osborne, destined himself to be the scourge of West End comedy, provides an example from his recent autobiography: 'Kensington High Street was the Appian Way to the West End. The border ended at Barker's Store and we rarely ventured beyond it except for visits to Woolworth's in Cork Street, which was scarcely going Up West. Going Up West was something we didn't do until the later years of the war. . . . Up West in the 1940s was a very different affair from Kensington High Street in the thirties.'¹

In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries people of fashion availed themselves of yet another way of marking the social distinction between where they lived and where their social inferiors lived, whether in the City of London and its eastward developments or in the poorer parts of Westminster. (Westminster contained, as it still does, extensive working-class areas, and is therefore not to be identified with the West End, even though administratively the West End was part of the sprawling City of Westminster.) The expression they often used for the fashionable area was simply 'the Town' (with or without the capital 'T'). And this term was naturally opposed to 'the City'. But in any historical period the term 'Town' has several senses (as it still does), and it is often difficult, in seventeenth-century usage, to decide which particular sense is being used. It is often synonymous with 'city', especially in Jacobean English, as it may still be in such phrases as 'town and country'. At other times, however, 'town' or 'Town' is used to designate a specifically fashionable part of a city, and

¹ *A Better Class of Person* (1981), p. 35.

particularly of London. Such a usage can of course occur only when cities have outgrown or are outgrowing their socially unsegregated lay-out and assumed the more familiar modern arrangement whereby certain areas are set apart for the more or less exclusive use of the rich and powerful.

In post-Restoration and early eighteenth-century England, the term 'Town' becomes fully established as the name for the capital within the capital, the part of London where, fashionably speaking, 'everyone' lived. Some of the social assumptions behind this understanding of 'Town' are explained by Steele in his periodical *Town-Talk* (1715-16). He writes in the form of a 'letter to a Lady in the Country':

But when I tell you I will give you only the Talk of the Town, it is necessary that I explain what I understand you expect by that Description of the sort of Intelligence you would have. It is ordinary to say the City, Town and Country: This takes in the residence of all the Inhabitants of this Great and Virtuous Island: But the Word Town implies the best People in the whole, wherever they are pleased, or are disposed, or able to live. The Town is the upper part of the World, or rather the fashionable People, those who are distinguished from the rest by some Eminence. These compose what we call the Town, and the Intelligent very well know, that many have got Estates both in *London* and *Westminster*, and dy'd in those Cities, that could never get into Town. As the Exchange is the Heart of *London*; the great Hall, and all under the contiguous Roofs, the Heart of *Westminster*, so is *Covent Garden* the Heart of the Town. What happens to be in Discourse or Agitation among the Pleasurable and Reasonable People is what shall make up the *Town-Talk*.¹

Making allowances for the arch emphases of Steele's humorous-didactic manner, one must assume that he is caricaturing a situation actually existing. He goes on to say: 'The Idle, and the Lazy are equally out of Town, if nothing arises from their Sloth or Employment worth preferring them to the Notice of the Elegant. It is in this Spirit, that when the Streets and Houses are full, it is often very justly said there is no Body in Town.' Steele's 'Town' is what in the following century was to be called 'Society'.

When we go back a hundred years or so earlier than Steele, however, it is not easy to know to what extent 'Town' has acquired this Society connotation. 'Town' is certainly often used merely as a synonym for 'city'; nevertheless there are, in Jacobean literature and drama, enough instances where the context requires a

¹ *Richard Steele's Periodical Journalism 1714-16* (Oxford, 1959), ed. Rae Blanchard, p. 191.

fashion-conscious sense to make it probable that the word had already extended itself into what one might call its West End viewpoint. So, for example, we catch this intonation in a letter written in 1618 by the court-gossip John Chamberlain: 'The Lord Digbie made a great supper and a play at White-hall to the best part of the great Lords and Ladies about this towne'.¹ The word 'city' would not, one feels, be quite right in this context. More clearly, the poem by Francis Beaumont, 'Letter from the Country to Jonson', written some time between 1610 and 1613, is surprisingly 'Restoration' in feeling, contrasting the dullness of the country to the brilliant wit and stimulus of 'the Towne' and contrasting that in turn to the witlessness of the City: 'witt able enough to iustifie the Towne / for three dayes past; witt yt might warrant bee / for the whole Citty to talk foolishly / Till that were Cancell'd . . .'.² Here, in a poem contemporary with *Epicoene*, we have 'Towne' and 'Citty' clearly distinguished and opposed to each other. In *Epicoene* itself, especially in its first act, we have, I believe, a very early instance of 'town' comedy, so that when Truewit uses the expression 'here i' the town' (I. i. 71), he is not just referring to the whole of London (what Beaumont calls 'the whole Citty') but only to a special part of it, the fashionable part, where Clerimont among others has his lodging.³

IV

Those who lived in 'the Town' were, almost by definition, ladies and gentlemen, members of the nobility and gentry. In a period of such profound social readjustment as the early seventeenth century, the qualities and duties of gentlemen especially were much discussed. Gentlemen feature with quite exceptional prominence among the *dramatis personae* of West End comedy—so much so that one might be tempted to rename the genre 'gentry comedy' (and in fact Horace Walpole did call it 'genteel comedy')⁴ were it not that 'West End' seems preferable in insisting on the importance of the fashionable London scene. Given the dominance

¹ *Letters* (Philadelphia, 1939), ed. N. E. McClure, ii. 193.

² *Ben Jonson* (ed. Herford and Simpson), x. 374–6.

³ For the phrase 'here i' the town', cf. Jonson's Epigram 12, 'On lieutenant Shift', which begins: 'Shift, here in town not meanest among squires'; in *Poems* (Oxford, 1975), ed. Ian Donaldson, p. 11.

⁴ Horace Walpole, 'Thoughts on Comedy', written in 1775 and 1776; in *Works* (1798). It has been reprinted in *Essays in Criticism* 15 (1965): 'The Man of Mode shines as our first genteel comedy . . .'. By 'genteel comedy' Walpole means 'comedy of fashionable life' or 'upper-class comedy'.

of gentlemen in this tradition of comedy, its social temper will be clarified a little by a glance at current notions of what gentlemen were in actual life.

The essential social mark of a gentleman was his freedom from the need to labour for his subsistence. In Elizabethan and Jacobean society, rural labourers, tradesmen and shopkeepers, artisans, and the enormous class of persons who must be called servants of one kind or another, all helped to define by contrast what gentlemen (aristocracy and gentry) were not. As Sir Thomas Smith put it in a much-quoted phrase: 'whosoever studieth the lawes of the realme, who studieth in the universities, who professeth liberall sciences, and to be shorte, who can live idly and without manuall labour, and will beare the port, charge and countenance of a gentleman, he shall be called master, for that is the title which men give to esquires and other gentlemen, and shall be taken for a gentleman.'¹ Lawyers, university graduates, and the rest, had earned through their studies the right to be called gentlemen, but the idea of a gentleman in its unqualified purity is always linked with his freedom not to work, his not having to get up early in the morning to earn his bread. Henry Peacham, in his *Complete Gentleman* (1622), puts it more caustically, though he is describing the same social phenomenon of the man of means who does not need to work: '... to be drunk, swear, wench, follow the fashion, and to do just nothing are the attributes and marks nowadays of a great part of our gentry.'² Viscount Conway, speaking as a gentleman himself, and not merely describing one from the outside, puts it in his own way: 'We eat and drink and rise up to play and this is to live like a gentleman; for what is a gentleman but his pleasure?'³

The implications of these remarks, and others like them, might be summed up as saying that gentlemen were not only free, but were positively entitled, to do nothing with their time if they chose. Expressions such as 'living like a lord', or 'like a gentleman', 'the idle rich', etc., though later than the Jacobean period, epitomize the views of the common people. That a gentleman was

¹ *De Republica Anglorum*, repr. 1906, pp. 39–40; quoted in Ruth Kelso, *The Doctrine of the English Gentleman* (Urbana, 1929), p. 26.

² *The Complete Gentleman* (Ithaca, 1962), ed. Virgil B. Heltzel, p. 19.

³ Quoted by Maurice Ashley, *England in the Seventeenth Century* (Harmondsworth, 1952), p. 18; and by Ann Jennalie Cook, *The Privileged Playgoers of Shakespeare's London*, p. 79. Neither Ashley nor Cook notes that Conway's final phrase is a proverbial expression. See M. J. Tilley, *The Proverbs of England in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Ann Arbor, 1950), p. 253. Tilley cites examples of 'What is a Gentleman but his pleasure?' from 1573 to 1732.

seriously to be defined in terms not only of his pleasure but of his sense of honour as well as of his willingness to assume unpaid public responsibilities is equally true, though satirists and writers of comedies were naturally not so interested in saying so. For them, conspicuous leisure and conspicuous waste not only of time but of other commodities were the obvious badges of the town gentleman.

The king might create a duke, but not even he could create a gentleman. This was a fact that contributed to the mystique of gentlemanliness, and enhanced the independence and pride of rank of especially the old-established gentry. Such men owed their gentility to no one, and nothing could take it away from them. Birth and breeding, property and wealth, education, all contributed to but did not finally explain the gentlemanly ethos. Webster's definition (cited by Tilley as proverbial) probably represents the prevailing view: 'What tell you me of Gentrie?—'tis nought else . . . But ancient riches.' (*The Devil's Law-Case*, 1. i. 40–3).

In London, for reasons already touched upon, the young gentlemen who were to be seen in the fashionable centres of amusement and entertainment were early associated with the Inns of Court. Membership of the Inns of Court was expensive; most places were filled by the gentry. As Ruth Kelso put it in her treatise on the Gentleman over fifty years ago: 'Of all professions . . . the fittest for a gentleman and those aspiring to become gentlemen was the law.'¹ This was the period when landed gentlemen in the country assumed the role that was to be theirs for the next three hundred years: local administrators and justices of the peace. They sent their sons to the Inns of Court to acquire the rudiments of law and to meet others of the same age, class, and mentality. 'Young men reading law in order to become justices of the peace mixed with other young men studying to become professional lawyers; the latter may themselves have been sons of the landed gentry, or they may have belonged to landless, professional or commercial families. Thus, lawyers, regardless of their family background, came even more to be thought of as gentlemen.'² Jonson's *Epicoene*, with its comic use of law-Latin and its protracted 'divorce' proceedings in the fifth act, is not only a comedy for gentlemen but a comedy for lawyers. And there was

¹ Kelso, p. 51.

² Mark Bence-Jones and Hugh Montgomery-Massingberd, *The British Aristocracy* (1979), pp. 45–6. See also Wilfrid R. Prest, *The Inns of Court under Elizabeth I and the Early Stuarts 1590–1640* (1972).

a strong chance that many of the gentlemen and lawyers, or rather law students, in Jonson's audience were the same people. In a word, the Inns of Court were an integral part of the Jacobean West End.

V

I have nominated *Epicoene* as the first West End comedy, and it is undeniably in many ways an innovative work. But it would be a mistake to suppose that those features in it which seem to us to look forward to Restoration comedy were all original with Jonson. *Epicoene* has its own specific theatrical and literary context; for Jonson, in so many respects a leader, sometimes naturally followed others. It would be truer to see *Epicoene* as the most distinguished of a whole group of plays, some of which were written before it. This is not of course to deny Jonson a fundamental originality; and in any case, as I shall argue in a moment, he was in some ways building upon what he himself had achieved in his earlier satirical comedies and these preceded most of the plays I am about to refer to. Nonetheless, in this time of radical readjustment of dramatic forms, the new subjects, the new treatments, and the new scenic structures which result, are all to some extent a co-operative venture, more the shared work of a group of dramatists closely inter-acting with each other than the sudden creation of a single genius. This is the justification for glancing at the work of one or two of Jonson's contemporaries.

The plays I have in mind were mostly written for the Boys' companies of actors, which had resumed activity in 1599. From the start this turn-of-the-century movement of highly professional boy-actors' drama was imbued with the spirit of the new satire. No doubt the rigorously trained boys were especially good at holding up precociously knowing mirror-images of social types actually to be found in their audiences. At any rate the years following James I's accession see the crystallization of a new theatrical formula. The plays in question are comedies, usually set in some fictitious vaguely foreign court, often with a double-plot of which one part may be romantic and the other more frankly comic. The comic action often involves the exhibition of an eccentric, which sometimes takes the form of a comic persecution, a 'baiting' extended through several episodes. A notable instance of this type of comedy is Beaumont's *The Woman Hater*. Others are the series written by Chapman, *Monsieur d'Olive*, *The Gentleman Usher*, and *Sir Giles Goosecap*. All these plays, written like *Epicoene* for one of the Boys' companies, preceded *Epicoene* on the stage.

Despite the fact that they are usually set in a foreign country, often in a notional ducal court, these plays sometimes adumbrate features from the immediate London scene. Indeed they represent a curious intermediate phase in the process which was to establish as a convention the setting of polite comedies in fashionable London. Of course *city* comedies were already being set in the City of London: Dekker's *Shoemaker's Holiday* is the obvious case. But Jacobean comedies of fashionable life—comedies of the incipient 'town'—at first preferred to distance their satirical actions by using the fiction of an exotic setting. Some plays use an odd half-way procedure, as Jonson himself did in *Every Man Out of His Humour* (1599), in which the characters are given Italianate names, while the manners and even at moments the settings are plainly English. Indeed one episode here is explicitly set in London's St. Paul's.¹ Jonson's earlier *Every Man In His Humour*, which we now think of as a triumph of London comedy, was of course first written (in 1598) with an Italian setting, and was recast in its London form only some years later (exactly when is not known; though 1612 or thereabouts seems to be the favourite present conjecture).² However, most plays of fashionable life before *Epicoene* used a foreign setting, so that London is glimpsed, if at all, only through a thin veil of romantic fiction.

The Woman Hater (first acted in 1606, published in 1607; according to Cyrus Hoy 'substantially Beaumont's', though 'with at least five scenes revised by Fletcher')³ is, I think, important for the composition of *Epicoene*. The play is set at the faintly sketched court of the Duke of Milan, but the atmosphere throughout is one of topical immediacy, and it soon emerges that what we are seeing is a play about fashionable London. (The dialogue frequently incorporates burlesque and parody, with more than one joke at the expense of Shakespeare: his recent big success, *Hamlet*, for instance, is 'taken off' in a fast allusive exchange: *Lazarello*. '... speake I am bound to heare.' *Count*. 'So art thou to revenge, when thou shalt heare . . .'). The young Count Valore,

¹ Jonson's scene clearly caught the attention of Wycherley, who modelled on it the ambitiously constructed episode set in Westminster Hall in *The Plain Dealer* (1676). *Every Man Out of His Humour* was given a single isolated stage revival in 1675. See R. G. Noyes, *Ben Jonson on the English Stage 1660-1776* (Cambridge, Mass., 1935), p. 297.

² See Gabriele B. Jackson (ed.), *Every Man in His Humour* (New Haven and London, 1969), pp. 221-39.

³ *The Dramatic Works in the Beaumont and Fletcher Canon*, general editor Fredson Bowers (Cambridge, 1966), i. 150. Quotations from *The Woman Hater* are from this edition.

whose sister eventually marries the Duke, is really a London gallant, a gentleman of means with plenty of time on his hands. Early in the play he soliloquizes: 'Now am I idle. I would I had bin a Scholler, that I might a studied now: the punishment of meaner men is, they have too much to doe; our onely miserie is, that without company we know not what to doe . . .' (I. iii. 54-7). His gentlemanliness is shown in his being 'idle', in his ostentatiously belonging to the *non*-working class. He goes on to say that he ought to act like others of his class ('I must take some of the common courses of our Nobilitie'): walk about the town in such a way as to attract attention, after dinner go to the theatre and attract more attention, and if possible find someone he can laugh at. What he needs above all is 'sport': amusement of any kind, preferably at the expense of someone else. At least he would do all this if he did in fact follow 'the common courses of our Nobilitie'; actually he is both more honourable and more subtle than that. But we are made to register some of the attitudes of the idle town gentry, as later when the Count says to Lazarillo, a courtier whose highest pleasure is eating rare dishes: 'hast thou not beene held to have some wit in the Court, and to make fine jests upon country people in progresse time, and wilt thou loose this opinion . . .?' (III. ii. 56-8). And we are made to notice too that the town-setting in some sense adumbrates London, as when the Count, musing about his sister, remarks that 'she did not pretend going to any sermon in the further end of the Cittie', for since the scene takes place in a fashionable courtier's lodging, the implication is that 'the further end' would be on the City's other, unfashionable, eastward side. In another scene a reference is made even to the Inns of Court (III. ii. 46).

The courtier in question is the Woman Hater himself, Gondarino. A widower, he hates women with an uncontrollable ferocity. One of the strongest scenes in the play is set in his town lodging, and shows him trying—unsuccessfully—to prevent the visit of a woman. What is at once striking about this scene is its strong sense of interiority: we are inside an upstairs room, with only one means of entry and exit:

Servant. My lord, the Counts sister beeing overtaken in the streets, with a great haile-storme, is light at your gate, and desires Roome till the storme be overpast.

Gondarino. Is shee a woman?

Servant. I my lord, I thinke so.

Gondarino. I have none for her then: bid her get her gone, tel her shee is not welcome.

Servant. My lord, shee is now comming up.

Gondarino. Shee shall not come up, tell her any thing, tell her I have but one great roome in my house, and I am now in it at the close stoole.

Servant. Shee's here my lord. (*Exit*).

Gondarino. O impudence of women, I can keepe dogs out of my house, or I can defend my house against theeves, but I cannot keep out women.

(II. i. 19-33)

Beaumont establishes not only a world of polite social constraints but also Gondarino's outrageous violation of them. And the enclosed upstairs setting, of a kind evidently very familiar to Beaumont's audience, sharpens the sense of social conflict. The upstairs first-floor apartment (the *piano nobile* a later age might have called it) was the most sought-after position; something of its social connotations of privilege and affluence are inherent in the scene's conception. For although the town outside is called Milan, Gondarino's windows might as well be opening on to the Strand. This is an early occurrence of a setting that is to become much more common in later Jacobean and Caroline comedy; the first act of *Epicoene* is one such instance.

Beaumont's misogynist has an obvious kinship with Jonson's misanthropic Morose. And later scenes in *The Woman Hater* show the Jonsonian affinity more clearly. In one scene Gondarino is subjected to further unwanted female company: he is talked to endlessly by a deaf old woman from the country who is under the impression that he is listening sympathetically to her suit. All he can say is: 'why should women only above all other creatures that were created for the benefit of man, have the use of speech?' (IV. i. 90-2). And in the final scene, as a last refinement of torment, he is tied to a chair and forced to listen to the endearments of women who in turn sit on his knee, stroke his hair, and even kiss him.

Beaumont's play seems to have failed when it was first acted, and critics since have not had much to say on its behalf. It is usually said to be raw and tentative; a bit stiff in the sinews. It is also said to be clearly derivative from Jonson's earlier humour plays. That there is an indebtedness need not be disputed; but I would want to claim that there is also something new in Beaumont's approach and that, in his turn, Jonson may have owed his friend a debt. The nature of this debt is to be found in the nature of Beaumont's subject. An intransigent woman-hater who is brought to heel by the concerted efforts of others, men and women, is a topic which will arouse complex and involuntary emotional responses. The punishment of an outsider by a group serves to dramatise in a rudimentary but oddly powerful way the workings

of human societies, bringing to mind while being performed the instinctual societal bonds that both keep human beings together and hold them frustratingly apart. In short, *The Woman Hater* is peculiarly social in its field of discourse. One might perhaps say something similar of Jonson's earlier humour plays (or even of Shakespeare's treatments of Malvolio and Parolles). But where Beaumont marks an advance on Jonson is in focusing attention on the single extended Gondarino action: the opposition between outsider and group is simplified, so that the stage is not overcrowded as it tends to be in, say, *Every Man Out of His Humour*. The gain in unity and coherence is important. And quite as important, Beaumont brings to the stage a relaxed, unaffected upper-class tone and point of view. He writes as a gentleman. He was himself a member of the landed gentry, and retired early from writing plays to take up his country estate; it is possible that the lower-born Jonson could acquire from him some useful hints of a social nature.¹

I have taken *The Woman Hater* as an instance of the incipient 'town' comedy of the first decade of the seventeenth century. But Beaumont was not alone in exploring the new area: he may himself have been following Chapman, some of whose sporadically interesting but hopelessly uneven comedies show a parallel development. Another original Inns-of-Court voice, similar to Beaumont's in social class, was Marston's, who also wrote comedies for the Boys. In all these plays a new concept of social comedy is emerging. And one sign of this development is the dramatist's new sense of interiority: his imaginative evocation of the private room.

Of course earlier Elizabethan drama has the occasional indoor scene, and in some of these scenes the sense of indoors is rendered with some distinctness. One might instance the opening scenes of Marlowe's *Jew of Malta* and *Dr Faustus*. But what is noticeable about these and others is that the interior setting is usually of either a professional or a public nature.² So in Marlowe's plays

¹ Beaumont could give Jonson hints of another kind. Dryden says of Beaumont that he was 'so accurate a judge of plays that Ben Jonson, while he lived, submitted all his writing to his censure, and, 'tis thought, used his judgment in correcting, if not contriving, all his plots'. ('*Of Dramatic Poesy*' and *Other Critical Essays* (1962), ed. George Watson, i. 68.)

² An exception is *Arden of Feversham* (c. 1588-91), which has several strongly rendered interior domestic scenes, notably that of Arden's murder. In addition the tavern scene in 2 *Henry IV* (II. iv), unlike the corresponding scene in 1 *Henry IV*, is set in an upstairs room, and is much less public in atmosphere. Shakespeare seems to have imagined the setting as a private room or 'chamber' to which Falstaff and Dol Tearsheet could retire after supper. After Pistol has

we have the counting-house of the merchant Barabas or the even more stereotyped scholar's study of Dr Faustus (the kind of setting which had already been given numerous pictorial representations, as in portrayals of St. Jerome in his study or the various portraits of Erasmus). As for indoor public settings, one might instance the great Boar's Head tavern scene in 1 *Henry IV*, with its precursors in Tudor morality plays, or else the many court scenes which showed the king enthroned. In such scenes the setting may be indoors, but the space evoked is essentially public space.

In the incipient 'town' plays which I am now considering space becomes not only more interiorized but more private. Scenes may now be set not only in professional and public places but in the places where people merely live, the rooms where they retire from the public domain to be themselves, to talk to friends, to make love, to sleep, even—as Gondarino reminds us—to use the close-stool. It is this sense of the inviolably private that we do not find in most earlier Elizabethan drama. Shakespeare's *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, for example, opens with the two friends talking together, yet there is not the slightest indication where the exchange is taking place. It could be indoors or outdoors; it is simply not specified—and it does not matter. Only with Ben Jonson, no more than nine years younger than Shakespeare yet of a quite different outlook, do we find the dramatist taking a positive interest in private space. In perhaps his earliest surviving play, *Every Man In His Humour*, we first meet Bobadil (to give him his later English name) in his lodging. His visitor Mathew finds him at his extremely unfashionable address ('lie in a water-bearer's house! a gentleman of his havings!') and proceeds upstairs to his room, where he finds him lying not in a bed but on a bench. 'Now, trust me', says Mathew sarcastically, 'you have an exceeding fine lodging here, very neat, and private.' The joke arises from the social pretentiousness of Bobadil and the sordidness of his actual surroundings: Bobadil's embarrassment is acute, and social embarrassment—a sense of confusion arising from the invasion of the private by the public—is something of a new emotion for the drama. Yet the scene is in its way a levee scene, or a parody of one, as the stage direction makes clear: '*While Master Mathew reads, Bobadill makes himself ready*' (the usual phrase for 'gets dressed'). Jonson may have taken over something from Shakespeare here: Falstaff (at least in Dover Wilson's plausible interpretation) is

misbehaved, he is driven downstairs, the term 'downstairs' receiving repeated emphasis. Shakespeare's scene may have suggested the choice of an upstairs private setting in later dramatists like Jonson and Beaumont.

also first revealed lying on a bench. But one difference is crucial: Falstaff, who is in any case imperturbable and unembarrassable, is shown in an unspecified setting, certainly not specifically private, whereas Bobadil wakes up in a room definitely private, and it is the shift to a specifically private place that marks a new viewpoint and a new sensibility.

The dramatist's new sense of the enclosed private room should not be seen in isolation from developments in European society at large. In his wide-ranging book *The City in History* (1961), Lewis Mumford traces the process whereby the place of business or work becomes separated from the house of residence, so that 'the "private house" comes into existence: private from business'. In due course 'Every part of life came increasingly to share this privacy.' 'A new type of housework was invented . . . : the care of furniture. The fixtures of the medieval household were equipment: chairs to sit on, beds to sleep in . . . so much and no more. Furniture is really a reinvention of the baroque period: for by furniture one means useless or super-refined equipment, delicate vases to dust, inlays and precious woods to polish . . .' In short, 'Display outstripped use.' And inevitably with the accumulation of new kinds of commodities developed a new sense of space: 'Up to the seventeenth century, at least in the North, building and heating had hardly advanced far enough to permit the arrangement of a series of private rooms in the dwelling. But now a separation of functions took place within the house as well as within the city as a whole. Space became specialised, room by room.' This new form of space, however, was not for everyone; it was expensive. 'Privacy was the new luxury of the well-to-do. . . . The lady's chamber became a boudoir, literally a "sulking place". . . . For the first time not merely a curtain but a door separated each individual member of the household from every other member.'¹

The complex social processes impressionistically evoked here can be corroborated from dozens of places in seventeenth-century English writing. As Mumford notes, the separation of functions proceeded both outside the house and within it. Outside the house,

¹ Mumford, pp. 383-4. Cf. Barbara Everett, 'The Shooting of the Bears: Poetry and Politics in Andrew Marvell', in *Andrew Marvell: Essays on the tercentenary of his death* (Oxford, 1979), ed. R. L. Brett, p. 61: 'Post-Tudor England saw the discovery of the formal private life. . . . England becomes a country of high-walled gardens and collectors' cabinets. Its gentlemen hang their houses with muffling silk and with silencing Turkey carpets; its ladies read romances and write letters.'

different parts of the city became devoted to specific purposes; efforts were made to rationalize the urban environment, to put things in their proper places. A small but significant incident will illustrate this development. In the middle of the most fashionable of streets, the Strand, there was a fish market. But as Howes notes, in his continuation of Stow's *Chronicle*, it was objected to: 'For divers yeares of late certain fishmongers have erected and set up fish stalles in the middle of the street in the Strand, almost over against Denmark House, all of which were broken down by speciall Commission, this moneth of May 1630, least in short space they might grow from stalles to sheddes, and then to dwelling houses, as the like was in former times in Old Fishe Streete . . .'¹ Denmark House was now a royal palace, named after Anne of Denmark; but in the London of Queen Henrietta Maria it was clearly felt to be intolerable to have a fish market outside the palace gates. (As a matter of fact, Howes was wrong in supposing the fish stalls to have been set up only a few years before. The recently published *Lisle Letters* show that fish was being bought in the Strand at least as early as the 1530s, and probably even earlier.)² The point to emerge is that in pre-modern London palaces and fish-stalls could share the same street; public decorum was not affronted. But segregation was now the order of the day. As we have noted already, the West End was purposefully pushing away from the City in one direction while the East End, badly laid-out, badly built, overcrowded, helplessly expanded in the other.

Inside the house, as Mumford observes, there were more walls and partitions, and more doors. There was a sharper sense of domestic demarcation. By the end of the century, when Congreve's *Millamant* lays down her conditions for marriage, she demands something, with complete seriousness, which none of Shakespeare's heroines would have thought of: 'And lastly, wherever I am, you shall always knock at the door before you come in.'

VI

I have been saying that from the late 1590s on, dramatists begin expressing a new sense of interior space and personal privacy. But before I return to the opening of *Epicoene*, I must raise a further

¹ Howes, *Annales*, 1631, p. 1045; quoted by Peter Cunningham, *Handbook for London* (1849), ii. 785.

² *The Lisle Letters* (Chicago and London, 1981), ed. Muriel St. Clare Byrne, v. 407.

question about the literary provenance of this type of levee scene. We should look for it, I think, in the direction of classical satire.

The satirical comedies of the ten years or so before *Epicoene* took much of their imaginative impulse from the non-dramatic satires of the 1590s. It was the verse satirists such as Donne, Hall, Marston and the rest—with Donne in the lead—who first began anatomizing contemporary society by hitting off the latest fashions in affectations and vices. They collected them into versified portrait-galleries; and they were enabled to do so by imitating classical Roman satire. By the late sixteenth century London had become, like early imperial Rome, a true metropolis, and for the first time English writers could view their own urban society through the spectacles of Horace, Persius, and Juvenal.

Jonson's comic-satiric play *Poetaster* (1602) is an upper-class drama of morals and manners set in Augustan Rome, with Ovid, Virgil, Horace, and Augustus himself as leading characters. In this play classical Rome and contemporary London have merged into each other, at least in Jonson's imagination, the figure of the poet Horace adumbrating Jonson's idea of himself. And it is in *Poetaster* that we find the earliest English instance of the form of opening scene—in the young man's town lodging—that we earlier traced back to *Epicoene*. But in *Poetaster*, of course, the city is Rome, not London. The time of day is not mentioned, though it feels early. But it is a striking fact that Ovid, the young man revealed in his lodging, is a law-student, who spends all his time writing poetry; and his first visitor is his father, who has come to upbraid him for neglecting his legal studies. The scene, though set in Rome, could just as well be in one of London's Inns of Court. It seems plausible to suppose that the kind of levee scene I described earlier is Roman in provenance and satirical in its original form.¹

Both the formal satires of Augustan Rome and the amorous elegies, which are themselves often satirical, are full of a sense of indoor urban life, of rooms and doors, and of windows opening onto streets thronged with passing crowds. This is precisely the impression we have in the earliest, and one of the best, of Elizabethan non-dramatic satires: the first satire of Donne's.² The poem opens in the poet's tiny book-filled study. He is called on by a restless friend and, halfway through the poem, they leave the chamber for a stroll through the crowded street. The poem is

¹ The Roman *salutatio*, the ceremonious early-morning visit of clients to their patron, presumably contributed something to the conception.

² For a full account of this poem, see Barbara Everett's Chatterton Lecture, 'Donne: A London Poet', in *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 1972.

usually dated 1593; for the first time in an original English poem we hear the urban and social note that is soon to become dominant in drama. We find here too the contrast between the private chamber, almost cell (Donne calls it 'this standing wooden chest', where is he 'coffin'd'), and the most public and social of settings, the open street. Donne possesses a highly developed sense of interiority, which finds expression not only in this satire but in several poems ('The Good-Morrow', 'The Sun Rising' among them) in *Songs and Sonnets*. It seems likely that in this matter Jonson was responding to Donne's lead.

Of the three Roman satirists, the one who is, it seems to me, closest in spirit to the Elizabethan satirists is neither Horace nor Juvenal but Persius. Indeed the importance of Persius for this period of English satire seems much under-estimated. Persius, the most austere religious-minded of the three, had a high reputation throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, culminating at the beginning of the seventeenth century in the edition of his poems by Casaubon, who gave him the first place among the satirists.¹ Donne is closer in style and sometimes in mood to Persius than to either of the other two, and it is not altogether surprising that he should actually have been addressed as 'Persius' in a contemporary English poem.²

Persius's Third Satire opens with the poet still in bed, though the morning is nearly over. A friend calls, and reproaches him for his laziness: he should be up and about. I shall quote it in Dryden's somewhat free version:

Is this thy daily course? the glaring Sun
Breaks in at ev'ry Chink: The Cattle run
To Shades, and Noon-tide Rays of Summer shun.
Yet plung'd in Sloth we lye; and snore supine,
As fill'd with Fumes of undigested Wine.

This grave Advice some sober Student bears,
And loudly rings it in his Fellows Ears.
The yawning Youth, scarce half awake, essays
His lazy Limbs and dozy Head to raise:
Then rubs his gummy Eyes, and scrubs his Pate;
And cries I thought it had not been so late:

¹ R. G. M. Nisbet, 'Persius', in *Critical Essays on Roman Literature: Satire* (1963), ed. J. P. Sullivan, p. 40. Persius receives an inverted form of praise in *Epicoene*, when Sir John Daw remarks: 'And Persius, a crabbed coxcomb, not to be endured.' (II. iii. 71.)

² R. M. Alden, *The Rise of Formal Satire in England* (Philadelphia, 1899), p. 76. The reference is to Epigram 84 in the second book of Thomas Freeman's *Rub and a Great Cast* (1614).

My Cloaths, make haste: why when! if none be near,
 He mutters first, and then begins to swear:
 And brays aloud, with a more clam'rous note,
 Than an *Arcadian* Ass can stretch his throat.

As Professor Nisbet says, this is 'one of the most vivid pictures in Persius'; and it must be, if not the earliest levee scene in European literature, at least a very early instance, offering a precedent therefore to all those other levee scenes we can trace in English comedy. In fact, as Housman was apparently the first to point out, this dialogue of Persius' is spoken not by two persons, the man in bed and his reproachful visitor, but by two parts of the poet's own mind: 'the satirist's higher and lower selves'.¹ So this bedroom vignette is no more, for Persius, than a way of embarking on his philosophical discourse. But in Elizabethan times it was taken literally (as it was later by Dryden) as a dialogue between two men, and it is unlikely that so lively a passage would have been overlooked by interested readers.

It was probably, then, both the development of metropolitan forms of life in London in the late sixteenth century and the influence of Roman satirical poetry that contributed to the interiorizing of space in English drama. Jonson was the first to show a sustained interest in it, not only in *Every Man In His Humour* and *Poetaster* (whose 'Apologetical Dialogue', printed after the text of the play, is set in 'The Author's Lodgings') but pre-eminently in *Volpone* (1605), whose claustrophobic bedroom scenes are especially close to the world of Roman satire. In *Epicoene* itself, the theme is announced in different ways: first in the opening scene in Clerimont's lodging, and later in the entire conception of Morose, with his obsessive craving for enclosure—his 'huge turban of nightcaps on his head', his 'room with double walls and treble ceilings', and his repeated cry 'Bar my doors, bar my doors!' And after *Epicoene*, his two single-house plays, *The Alchemist* (1610) and *The New Inn* (1629), though very unequal in quality, continue to explore the imaginative possibilities of interior space.

In these same years other writers, attempting an early form of comedy of manners, showed a similar interest in putting private rooms or lodgings on the stage and even in the scenic possibilities,

¹ Nisbet, p. 53. Independently, Barbara Everett suggests (*Donne: A London Poet*, p. 250) that Donne's first Satire proceeds through a method of internalized debate, the stay-at-home scholar and the restless friend both representing aspects of the poet himself. As she notes, Donne's practice here owes something to Persius.

following *Volpone*, of the levee situation itself.¹ So Chapman opens his comedy *The Widow's Tears* (printed 1612, but perhaps written as early as 1606) with a morning scene: 'Tharsalio *solus, with a glass in his hand, making ready*'; but Chapman makes little of it, and the scene is set in a vague Cyprus. More interestingly, Marston has a scene in *What You Will* (printed 1607) which much more vividly evokes the appurtenances of an actual bedroom: '*Laverdure's lodging*'. '*One knocks. Laverdure draws the curtains, sitting on his bed, apparelling himself; his trunk of apparel standing by him.*' Laverdure calls his servant: '*Enter Bidet, with water and a towel.*' The dialogue that follows between master and servant might almost be out of a Restoration comedy: Laverdure, a French fop, looks forward to the heroic extravagances of Lord Foppington in Vanbrugh's *Relapse*. Marston's scene, however, does not open the play and therefore lacks structural emphasis, and is set in Venice, so forfeiting topographical immediacy. But *What You Will* appeared just two years or so before *Epicoene* and was written for the same company of boy actors; and undeniably the other ingredients for the levee formula—morning in the gallant's lodging, dialogue between master and servant, and visits from social acquaintances—are all here.

VII

By opening *Epicoene* with Clerimont in his London lodging, and by constructing for him a long unhurried conversation with his friends, Jonson at one stroke brought Jacobean comedy into a mode that made it instantly available to the Restoration.² In doing so he was obeying the inner logic of the development of comedy during the previous ten years; for now, by boldly locating his action in London, and not only in London but in the fashionable quarter which his audience knew best, he was giving it the immediacy and realism for which those earlier comedies had, less effectively, all along been striving. Jonson's solution to the problem of setting must have come with the force of revelation.³

¹ Jonson's own *Staple of News* (1626) opens with a levee scene based, as Herford and Simpson note, on Horace, *Satires* (II. iii. 226–37).

² Whether consciously or not, Etherege seems to have modelled the opening scene of *The Man of Mode* on Jonson's scene. Etherege's scene in turn furnished a model for Congreve's in *Love for Love*.

³ R. V. Holdsworth's edition of *Epicoene* has a useful guide to criticism of the play. The following seem to me the most noteworthy: James A. Barish, *Ben Jonson and the Language of Prose Comedy* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960); Ian Donaldson, *The World Upside-Down* (Oxford, 1970); Terence Hawkes, *Shakespeare's Talking Animals* (1973); Edward B. Partridge, *The Broken Compass* (1958);

The levee or getting-up-late scene, placed with the utmost emphasis at the opening of the play, amounts to an icon of status and property-based social power. It demonstrates the gentleman's ability to do nothing; while others get up early to work, he sleeps. The gentleman, idle in his lodging, strikes an attitude as richly symbolic in its way as that of the king seated on his throne; and just as the monarch and courtier have been central figures on the Renaissance cultural scene, so the propertied gentleman, with an estate in the country and lodgings in town, will dominate the coming gentrified bourgeois age. It is, moreover, from out of the fashionable, socially poised privacy of Clerimont's upstairs town apartment that the attack is to be sprung on the unfashionable, anti-social privacy of Morose's house. And crucial to Clerimont's lodging is the sense, wholly implicit, of its being a stoutly defended social citadel from which forays can be made of a superior, patronizingly dismissive nature. Only those who belong to the inner circle are freely admitted. His two friends come and go unannounced and unbidden, whereas others must wait downstairs until they are given permission to come up. So Sir Dauphine asks Clerimont for La Foole's full name.

Clerimont. Sir Amorous La Foole.

Boy. The gentleman is here below that owns that name.

Clerimont. 'Heart, he's come to invite me to dinner, I hold my life.

Dauphine. Like enough. Pray thee, let's ha' him up.

Clerimont. Boy, marshal him.

And the Boy's reply—'With a truncheon, sir?'—pertly suggests that La Foole is to be admitted only under guard. In all this, the sense of inner and outer that results, of superior and inferior, of élite and multitude, is one that looks back to the satires of Donne and Persius as well as forward to Jonson's successors such as Congreve. But whereas in Persius the discourse would have been governed by the search for some kind of wisdom, what we find here in Clerimont and his friends is that their undoubtedly superior judgement and wit have been reinforced by an elusive social superiority, an exercise of social power, elegant in expression but aggressive in temper, which gives them, as a group, unquestioned authority to amuse themselves at the expense of others. They are instances of those 'fashionable People' who, as

L. G. Salingar, 'Farce and Fashion in *The Silent Woman*', *Essays and Studies*, NS xx (1967). My approach has most in common with L. G. Salingar's, which anticipates me on a number of points. His admirable essay was the first to investigate the immediate social milieu of *Epicoene*.

Steele put it in his remarks on the Town, are 'distinguished from the rest by some Eminence'.

I have already glanced at Clerimont's opening exchange with his boy servant. When Truewit arrives, he at once draws attention to Clerimont's pleurably idle way of life, so continuing the topic which the play has already broached; and despite the desultory informality of his talk it should not be overlooked that what Jonson is doing is building up a description of the style of living of Clerimont and his class almost as formal as the allegorical tableau of Volpone worshipping his gold. Truewit's theme is waste of time. Clerimont lives frivolously, lying late in bed, listening to his own songs, doing nothing positive: 'Why, here's the man that can melt away his time, and never feels it! What between his mistress abroad and his ingle at home, high fare, soft lodging, fine clothes, and his fiddle, he thinks the hours ha' no wings or the day no post-horse. Well, sir gallant,' he goes on, firmly identifying him with the class of town gentlemen for which usually Jonson had little affection, 'were you struck with the plague this minute or condemned to any capital punishment tomorrow, you would begin then to think and value every article o' your time, esteem it at the true rate, and give all for't.' Truewit speaks almost in the voice of the Old Testament preacher¹ or the not wholly dissimilar voice of the Stoic Persius. And when Clerimont replies 'Why, what should a man do?', the resonance of his question for a moment condemns him out of his own mouth. In any case, he goes on to say, he can postpone being serious till when he is old: 'then we'll pray and fast.' This gives Truewit his cue, and he goes off into his 'act'—as a moralizing preacher: 'Oh, Clerimont, this time, because it is an incorporeal thing and not subject to sense, we mock ourselves the fineliest out of it, with vanity and misery indeed . . .'—until, still not making any headway with his imperturbable friend, he abruptly abandons the whole topic and switches to social matters of more immediate interest.

Through Truewit's burlesque performance, with its apparently genuine streak of seriousness, Jonson is stating the terms within which his comedy is to be taken. The moral considerations which, for Jonson, were of permanent and constant validity, are here going to be as if suspended, postponed to some unspecified future occasion. That *Epicoene* is not to be a moral comedy Truewit's ineffectual appeal to serious matters, quickly abandoned, makes

¹ As in Proverbs 6:9: 'How long wilt thou sleep, O sluggard? when wilt thou arise out of thy sleep?' Cf. the passage from Archenholz, quoted at p. 226, n. 2 above, for West End 'idleness' as seen by an eighteenth-century visitor.

clear. We have to do with a play whose bearings are instead predominantly social (Partridge rightly calls it 'this play about society').¹ Indeed one chief effect of the interiorization of the drama, its withdrawal into enclosed rooms, is to focus attention on behaviour rather than action. Comedy, switching allegiance from romance to satire, will be less concerned with telling a story of human action than with appraising and scrutinizing manners.

Some critics think Jonson is outright hostile to the gallants in this play. He is against them, they think, precisely because they belong to the ranks of the idle rich. It seems to me more complicated than that. He certainly fixes them with his envious, resentful gaze: he knows everything that can be said against them. Yet he refrains from condemnation. They are not exposed to satire or unfavourable comment. Nor are they ever ridiculous. Even when Truewit misjudges the situation and officiously tries to scare Morose out of marriage, he does not altogether lose his dignity. What saves the three friends is their language and their intelligence. They speak with a quick-glancing allusiveness and a nervous yet graceful volubility. They have an exquisitely exclusive style. It exquisitely shuts them in and shuts other people out. In effect Jonson's presentation is to say to each of them: 'Anyone who can talk like you is my friend'. So despite, and perhaps because of, the fact that their presence surrounds the action with an air of aristocratic idleness, Jonson is not, on the face of it, making them his targets. In any case neither Clerimont nor Truewit gets anything out of the day's business, except amusement; only Sir Dauphine gets his unnatural uncle where he wants him. So they are above mercenariness, mere gain. They are also above making any bid for our sympathies. We are not required to like them in order for the play to succeed; hence the lack of warmth, the heartlessness even, which at times may dismay the reader or spectator. But the lack of warmth goes with the society-orientated amorality: the play is without a heart for the same reason that it lacks a love interest. It is scrupulously external in its treatment of the workings of society.

The idea of society governs the whole play, dictating the dialogue's choice of topics and the incidents that make up the action. 'Society' so understood involves not so much the primary familial ties or the basic passions of the individual as the unavoidable exigencies of living with others in the same small social system, the relationships people form merely in virtue of the fact that they make part of an aggregate of persons such as

¹ Yale edition of *Epicoene* (New Haven and London, 1971), p. 12.

themselves: neighbours, acquaintances, colleagues, friends chosen through the accidents of propinquity; persons whose typical doings are those exhibited by the play: exchanging greetings, hearing news, retailing gossip, discovering secrets or withholding them, forming clubs, cliques and cabals, engaging in idle talk, and inventing both occasions for getting together and excuses for holding aloof. Since social living inevitably entails competitiveness, the recurring motives are those of enhancing one's own reputation or damaging that of others, self-advertisement, keeping up appearances, and hence sexual flirtatiousness and sexual boasting, as well as snobbishness, social climbing, and all forms of showing off. All these topics and others are aired in *Epicoene*, most obviously in the follies of the knights, the Collegiate Ladies, and the Otters, but also in the behaviour of the three gallants, whose fluidly changing interrelationships enact some of the moment-to-moment volatilities of ordinary social interchange. At times *Epicoene* sounds almost like Swift's *Polite Conversation* in the attention it gives to the banal niceties of small-talk, the games, the gambits, the minuscule stratagems, the clichés. And it listens hard for the sillinesses of vogue-words and the exaggerations ritually required of their members by social gatherings: 'Has Sir John Daw used me so inhumanly?' cries Sir Amorous La Foole. His effetely socialized 'inhumanly' was to be picked up by Congreve's Tattle in the similar town-world of *Love for Love*: 'How inhuman! . . . Gentlemen, this is the most inhuman proceeding—. . . Oh inhuman!'

Society in this understanding of the term is the arena of a power-struggle that never stops—where the power is by definition not political or military or erotic but social power. The play's pre-occupation with social power is equally manifest when it is approached from a quite different direction. It has long been established that the chief dramatic model for *Epicoene* is Aretino's comedy *Il Marescalco* (*The Stable-Master*, printed in 1533).¹ This play both is set at and was actually performed at the ducal court of Mantua. Its action is in some ways not unlike that of Beaumont's *Woman Hater*. An elderly bachelor, suspected of pederasty, is tormented for the entire length of the play by being forced into marriage, as he thinks, by the Duke. Much of the action consists of his desperate attempts to wriggle out of what to him is an utterly intolerable fate. The force that compels the victim-hero towards his dreaded marriage is nothing less than the political power of

¹ Translated by George Bull, in *Five Italian Renaissance Comedies* (Harmondsworth, 1978), ed. Bruce Penman.

the Duke. But when Jonson wrote his own play he introduced a decisive change in setting it not in a ducal court but in the fashionable part of London. The political courtly element is simply removed, leaving the play's power-system one involving more or less equal private citizens, gentlemen (some of them knights) and ladies, who struggle for different forms of precedence. The effect is to focus attention on to purely social pressures.

If the persecution of Morose owes something to a courtly entertainment, the same can be said for the subsidiary action in the fourth act of the play. This is the intrigue which brings together in a duel the two timorous and terrified combatants Sir Amorous La Foole and Sir John Daw. It is usual for editors of *Epicoene* to take it as established that Jonson's source here was Shakespeare. As Herford and Simpson say: 'The "duel" of Daw and La Foole (iv. v) is palpably built on that of Aguecheek and Viola.' The resemblance between the two scenes is not in doubt; but I question whether *Twelfth Night* should really be thought Jonson's source. It seems to me much more likely that Jonson's true source here is to be found in Sidney's *Arcadia* (3. 13)—the extended farcical episode which shows the craven braggarts Damoetas and Clinias brought by a series of ruses into a full-scale hand-to-hand fight in front of the two armies: the 'combat of cowards' as Sidney calls it. This is one of the most ambitious comic set-pieces in the whole of the *Arcadia*; and given the fame of this work throughout the early Stuart period, it seems more likely that, in this of all his plays, Jonson would have wished to align himself with Sidney rather than with a fellow-practitioner in the theatre. A comparison between the 'combat of cowards' in Sidney, Shakespeare, and Jonson would in any case show, I believe, that Jonson is much closer to Sidney than to Shakespeare.¹

¹ Like Jonson, Shakespeare is probably himself indebted to Sidney here; but he introduces the complicating factor of Viola-Cesario's mistaken identity, and whereas he eliminates Sidney's contemptuous tone, Jonson retains it. There is in addition one verbal link which strengthens the case for Jonson's debt to Sidney. Near the beginning of the relevant chapter, Sidney uses the unusual word 'dotes', meaning 'natural gifts': '... not a little extolling the goodly dotes of Mopsa'—Mopsa, the foolish daughter of the cowardly Damoetas. Jonson seems to have noticed this promising word and incorporated it into *Epicoene*, where Clerimont says to Daw: 'I muse a mistress can be so silent to the dotes of such a servant' (ii. iii. 91). Here, as Holdsworth notes, the word not only means 'natural gifts' but carries the latent satirical sense 'stupidities'—as it probably does also in Sidney. Sidney himself may have taken the idea for his 'combat of cowards' from the famous romance *Amadis de Gaule*. See John J. O'Connor, '*Amadis de Gaule*' and its Influence on Elizabethan Literature (Rutgers, 1970), p. 191.

My reason for mentioning the possibly Sidneian derivation of this episode is that it helps to bring out the aristocratic nature not only of the play's sources but of its own social assumptions. Essential to both Aretino's and Sidney's comedy is a posture of pride of rank on the part of the perpetrators of the jest (complemented by an unquestioning deferentiality among the lower orders) and a dismissive contempt for the eccentric or degenerate victims of it. In Sidney's aristocratic romance, Damoetas and Clinias are despicable buffoons, not much better than apes dressed in ermine. Sidney's writing is often genuinely funny, but always with a sharp edge and with a total lack of sympathy for his cowardly pair which stops us forgetting the social distinctions involved. Something of this steely Sidneian hauteur permeates Jonson's duel scene. Jonson is after all writing a comedy for and about the upper classes; and although he never writes about them with the insider's ease which Beaumont and Fletcher brought to the drama, his play is designed to leave its gentry-audience with a strong sense of class-solidarity and class-satisfaction. In order to minister to this final sense of social well-being, unworthy members of the order must be seen to be degraded and expelled from it.

Sir Amorous La Foole and Sir John Daw are both low-quality knights, and the unsparing treatment meted out to them is clearly related to their unmerited honours. Indeed in the last two acts, where La Foole and Daw are made, by repeated interrogation, to confess to having enjoyed sexual favours from Epicoene, it is hard not to feel that Jonson is disagreeably forcing the issue. Neither La Foole nor Daw has previously boasted of his conquests; La Foole especially has been earlier established as ninny rather than knave, and to see him baited at length by Clerimont and his friends makes Jonson's strategy not so much amusing as unpleasant. It is possible, on the other hand, that Jonson intends the malice and even cruelty of his tormentors to be exposed to the audience's disapproval; they behave in a way which recalls the bored irresponsibility of the town gentry as described by the young Count in Beaumont's *Woman Hater*. And when at one point Daw offers to cut his arm off as reparation (iv. v. 119–20) and Sir Dauphine accepts the offer, Truewit's response—'How! Maim a man forever for a jest! What a conscience hast thou?'—makes it clear that, for Truewit as for Jonson, there are limits to be observed in even the most sadistic practical joking. Sir Dauphine, the most coolly reserved of the three gallants, and the only one with a title, is also the most coolly ferocious.

In its social attitudes, as we have seen, the play looks back to the

court-world of Sidney and Aretino as well as forward to the town-world of Congreve and his contemporaries. A few of its scenes anticipate Congreve in another way. Congreve was criticised by some critics of his time for writing not true comedy but a 'Bundle of Dialogues'; his plays were, they thought, defective in plot and action.¹ Despite Jonson's care in *Epicoene* to control his plot in all its elaborate complexity, quite a lot of the second half especially can give an effect of dialogue rather than drama, of polite conversation meticulously mimicked by marionettes. It is perhaps this slightly desiccated subhuman level of characterization and dialogue (at least in the fourth and fifth acts) that helps explain the absence of *Epicoene* from the modern stage. But not only that: its comedy of torment and teasing is too relentless, too nakedly exposed in its sheer unpleasantness, simply too prolonged, to make much appeal to a modern audience. Despite the genuinely funny passages and single lines, the play's mirth is finally less than infectious.²

The central episode of *Epicoene*, however, breaks free of the attenuated verbalism that may, for modern producers, throw doubt on the play's potential in the theatre. Here the form taken by the action is a favourite one of Jonson's. People from one urban area *invade* another. They force their way within the precincts of a private house, with an effect of gross violation. The idea of invasion, of the violation of territorial rights, was present as early as *Every Man in His Humour*, where the jealous Thorello/Kitely's house was invaded by impertinent and noisy strangers (in the revised version Jonson introduces the term 'invade' near the play's opening, where Knowell Senior says to Stephen: 'I would not have you to invade each place, / Nor thrust yourself on all societies . . .'; the earlier text had 'intrude'). Volpone too suffers an invasion—in his case, a one-woman invasion in the form of Lady Would-be: 'All my house, / But now, steam'd like a bath, with her thick breath'. And invasion on a far bigger scale is what Morose's house suffers when La Foole's quarter-day party is maliciously diverted into it. Indeed social invasion—people pushing their way into places where they are not wanted—forms the dominant stage image of *Epicoene*, a picture embodying the vexation, almost the horror, of close social living, and more especially the exhausting pressure

¹ See Maximillian E. Novak, *William Congreve* (New York, 1971), p. 78.

² *Epicoene* seems to have had only one professional production in recent times, that at the Oxford Playhouse in 1967. On that occasion, it seemed to me, the play at several points came across as so ill-natured as to lose the sympathy of the audience.

of other people's personalities. Of course Morose is a selfish, unlikeable misanthrope, whom all discourses but his own afflict; and as such he is subjected to a traditional ritual of punishment. But in so far as he is also the representative, as he is to some extent, of human sensibility shrinking from the noise and congestion of Jacobean London, he draws to himself some—however little—of our sympathy, whether Jonson saw it that way or not.

In a longer perspective, the fetidly gregarious nature of Morose's persecution assumes a social meaning in accord with wider developments in Jonson's London. His play shows people forced into social intimacy with an effect of horrible abrasiveness. And in doing so, it dramatizes that pressure for greater living space, that growing social desire for segregation and exclusion and leisured privacy, which was already finding public expression. Without in any way advocating it, or even advertent to it, Jonson shows town and city moving apart.

To think of Shakespeare in the midst of these forward-looking London matters is to be struck by how very far away he is from them. The only mention of the Strand in his plays is in *Henry VIII*, in a scene that may in any case be by Fletcher. At the time when Jonson was writing *Epicoene*, Shakespeare was embarking upon his final romances: *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* were only one or two years ahead. The thought may serve to remind us how various and capacious, how resistant to simplifying formula, is the drama of the early Jacobean period.

APPENDIX

THE LATER WEST END TRADITION

In this Appendix I add a few notes and quotations to indicate the development of West End comedy from the mid nineteenth century onwards, and I take a little further some of the themes already touched upon: the town gentleman; the levee scene; and the West End of London.

It is in the early nineteenth century that this tradition of comedy comes closest to disappearing altogether. At this time even the best Restoration comedies began to lose the hold on the stage which they had maintained throughout the eighteenth century. In the 1840s, however, attempts were made to adapt the older comedy of manners to new social conditions and tastes. These mid-Victorian plays are undoubtedly slight and thin and even 'puerile' (to use the word which Henry James applied to Robertson's comedies); but they have a certain historical importance in that they helped to attract a fashionable

audience back into the theatre, and so prepared the way for the nineties drama of Pinero, Wilde, and Shaw.

Dion Boucicault's comedy *London Assurance* (1841) sets most of its action in a country house, but it opens in London at the Belgrave Square home of Sir Harcourt Courtly. Sir Harcourt is still in bed, and his son Charles, having just come home after a night on the town, has to solicit the butler's help in keeping up his pretence of being a paragon of virtue. He narrowly misses walking into his father who, still in a dressing-gown, has descended from his bedroom. The scene is a variant on the levee formula, showing at the same time both Sir Harcourt's comfortable way of life and his son's profligacy. The bulk of the play does not concern us; but it ends with a resounding reaffirmation of the gentlemanly ideal. Sir Harcourt is addressing his son and his son's friend:

And these are the deeds which attest your title to the name of gentleman? I perceive that you have caught the infection of the present age. Charles, permit me, as your father, and you, sir, as his friend to correct you on one point. Barefaced assurance is the vulgar substitute for gentlemanly ease; and there are many who by aping the *vices* of the great, imagine that they elevate themselves to the rank of those whose faults alone they copy. No, sir. The title of a gentleman is the only one *out* of any monarch's gift, yet within the reach of every peasant. It should be engrossed by *Truth*—stamped with *Honour*—sealed with *good-feeling*—signed *Man*—and enrolled in every true young English heart. CURTAIN.

London Assurance demonstrates, over two hundred years after *Epicoene*, that West End comedy is still closely associated with the social outlook of the gentry. And the title of gentleman is still prized, as it was in the seventeenth century, as being beyond the gift of a monarch.

Boucicault's later comedy *Old Heads and Young Hearts* (1844) opens with a highly traditional morning scene: '*The Temple. The Interior of Littelton Coke's Chambers, meagrely furnished. COKE is discovered at breakfast, reading the paper. BOB, cleaning a Meerschaum, R.*' Between reading out items of news, Coke expresses his sense of poverty and laments his lack of success in his profession. Bob remarks: 'But your father, at his death, sir, left you 700*l* a year.' To which Coke replies: 'To support 7000 appetites he bequeathed me at my birth . . .' Boucicault seems to be recalling here, in a general way, Valentine's poverty in Congreve's *Love for Love*, but more particularly the striking exchange between Valentine and his father Sir Sampson in Act II. Here, Sir Sampson brutally disclaims responsibility for his son: ' . . . Come, Uncase, Strip, and go naked out of the World, as you came into 't.' To which Valentine replies: 'My Cloaths are soon put off:—But you must also deprive me of Reason, Thought, Passions, Inclinations, Affections, Appetites, Senses, and the huge Train of Attendants that you begot along with me.' Faint though it

is, Coke's echo of Valentine shows the presence of Congreve in early Victorian comedy and hence the continuity of the tradition. At the same time Boucicault's play illustrates the persistence of the link between the gentleman and the legal profession, here symbolized in the Inns of Court setting.

Among Edward Bulwer-Lytton's plays is *Not So Bad As We Seem, or, Many Sides to a Character*, a historical extravaganza in neo-Restoration form, with an action set in London during the reign of George I. (It was first performed in 1851, at Devonshire House, Piccadilly, before Queen Victoria and the Prince Consort.) The opening scene shows 'Lord Wilmot's *Apartment* in St. James's.' The valet Smart appears:

Smart (*showing in a Masked Lady*). My Lord is dressing. As you say, madam, it is late. But though he never wants sleep more than once a week, yet when he does sleep, I am proud to say he sleeps better than any man in the three kingdoms.

Lady. I have heard much of Lord Wilmot's eccentricities—but also of his generosity and honor.

Smart. Yes, madam, nobody like him for speaking ill of himself and doing good to another.

Enter WILMOT.

Wilmot. 'And sleepless lovers just at twelve awake.' Any duels to-day, Smart? No—I see something more dangerous—a woman. (*To Smart*). Vanish.

The cast-list for this royal performance included some well-known names: Lord Wilmot was played by 'Mr. Charles Dickens', Smart by 'Mr. Wilkie Collins'. The connection of the play with Restoration comedy is, though indirect, quite clear, not only in the nature and form of the scene but in the hero's name (alluding, like the name of the hero of *Jane Eyre*, four years before, to John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester). As usual, the lateness of the hour receives comment.

T. W. Robertson's comedy *Society*, usually said to have opened a new chapter in Victorian drama, was first acted in 1865. The play was put on by Marie Wilton and her husband Squire Bancroft, who were pioneers in the process of bringing back fashionable audiences into the theatre; as much as anyone, they helped to establish the present West End theatrical system. *Society* opens in the hero's rooms, which are once again in the Inns of Court: 'Sidney Daryl's *Chambers in Lincoln's Inn*.' His servant Doddles is on stage. A visitor is the first to speak.

Tom (*without*): Mr Daryl in?

Doddles: Not up yet. (*Enter Tom Stylus, Chodd Jun., and Chodd Se.*)

Chodd Jun. (*looking at watch*): Ten minutes to twelve, eh, guv?

Tom: Late into bed; up after he oughter; out for brandy and sobering water.

Sidney (*within*): Doddles.

Doddles: Yes, sir!

Sidney: Brandy and soda.

We soon learn that Sidney is 'in his bath'—a new addition to the levee formula. For all the piquancy of its class comedy and the novelty of its realistic décor, Robertson's comedy is traditional in more ways than is usually allowed. The Chodds are intruding City types, tasteless but moneyed; Sidney is feckless but genteel. The next scene is set in '*The interior of a Square at the West End*': it brings on Sidney's fiancée, who is to be boorishly pursued by Chodd Junior. However remote in style from Jonson, Etherege, and Congreve, *Society* operates within the well-trodden precincts of town-and-city comedy.

Wilde's *Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), the best known comedy of manners from the end of the century, is in some ways a deliberate throw-back to the aestheticism of Congreve, though Gilbert's *Engaged* is a more immediate influence. Its opening scene is thoroughly traditional in orientation, but Wilde removes any suggestion of mere literariness by inventing a convincing variation on the levee formula. It is set not at morning but in the afternoon, so that the expected visitors are coming for afternoon tea. The opening dialogue between master and servant (compare *Epicoene* and *Love for Love*) is a fine instance of this traditional form, with Lane the butler effortlessly upstaging his employer.

During this same period of the revival of West End comedy, London also saw the rise of music-hall, the indigenous art-form of the East End. Many of its songs focus on the West End, and once again—for the first time in any notable way since the early seventeenth century—the Strand is singled out as the most illustrious street in London. (Not that earlier writers had ignored it: Dr Johnson and Lamb had paid it tribute; and Disraeli, in *Tancred*, remarked airily that 'the Strand is, perhaps, the finest street in Europe'). To judge from these music-hall songs, many East Enders regarded walking down the Strand as the height of social ambition. But the Strand is now much more a centre of West End entertainment than of fashionable life—by this time, of course, the true centre of fashion had long moved further west.¹ Still, in this period the mere mention of the Strand conferred glamour on the speaker, often ironically disclaimed—like the remark used by Marie Lloyd as a favourite opening gambit: 'Sorry I'm late—I got blocked in the Strand.' One of the songs written for the male impersonator Ella Shields, 'Burlington Bertie from Bow', was a sequel to an earlier number of Vesta Tilley's, a plain 'Burlington Bertie'. In

¹ 'The Strand is remarkable as containing more theatres than any other street in London': see H. B. Wheatley's *London Past and Present* (1891), iii. 323. Since Wheatley wrote, the Gaiety and the Tivoli, among others, have been demolished; Irving's Lyceum is no longer in use as a theatre, and (as it seems at the time of writing) the Adelphi may undergo a similar fate.

the sequel, Bertie has come down in the world and lives in Bow (in East London); and his words trace a new variant on the West End levee formula:

I'm Bert, p'raps you've heard of me,
 Bert. . . . you've had word of me . . .
 I dress up in fashion, and when I'm feeling depressed,
 I shave from my cuff all the whiskers and fluff,
 Stick my hat on and toddle up West.
 I'm Burlington Bertie,
 I rise at ten-thirty, and saunter along like a toff,
 I walk down the Strand, with my gloves on my hand,
 Then I walk down again with them off . . .¹

In a small way the song is a fantasy of fashionable leisure: it exploits the Cockney angle on the West End and, as so often, picks out what was most enviable to the working-class man—the gentleman's supposed freedom from the imposition of early morning rising. (The upper-class lady's freedom too: the high point of the comic tradition we are considering could be said to be the scene in *The Way of the World* in which Millamant declares: 'Positively Mirabell, I'll lie a-bed in a morning as long as I please'.)

A real-life 'toff' of the same period was Somerset Maugham, although he began his career working hard as a doctor in one of London's hospitals. He worked even harder as a writer. In a few years he was to have three plays running concurrently in the West End. One of them, *Lady Frederick* (written in 1904, first acted in 1907), is a fair instance of the turn-of-the-century transmutation of West End comedy, with its strong infusion of 'Gallic' worldly wisdom and with the well-tryed formulas of the *pièce bien faite* given a new, but not too novel, twist. It even has an excellent specimen of the levee scene, but with the usual arrangement reversed by having it open the last (third) act instead of the first, and by making the protagonist a woman. This is the scene—it enjoyed a mild notoriety for a time—in which the 'mature' Lady Frederick (i.e. between thirty and thirty-five) admits her innocent young suitor to her dressing-room and, in order to disillusion him, lets him see her make herself up: '*She comes through the curtains. She wears a kimono, her hair is all dishevelled, hanging about her head in a tangled mop. She is not made up and looks haggard and yellow and lined. When MERESTON sees her he gives a slight start of surprise.*' The play is set, however, not in London but in Monte Carlo, though it might as well be London since the characters are entirely West End people. When she has despatched the young man, she finally agrees to marry her faithful admirer, 'a very well-dressed man of forty-odd', who—in reply to her remark 'I've got half a mind to retire from the world and bury myself in a hermitage'—says 'So have I, and

¹ Daniel Farson, *Marie Lloyd and Music Hall* (1972), p. 137.

I've bought the lease of a little house in Norfolk Street, Park Lane.' She replies: 'Just the place for a hermitage—fashionable without being vulgar.'

Maugham brings us back nearly to the age of Noel Coward, whose entry into the West End theatre can be symbolized by a moment in his autobiography as he glides in a taxi through the Strand. The time is August 1918; Coward is eighteen, and has just been unexpectedly released from the army 'in a state of indescribable happiness. At Liverpool Street I took a taxi and drove through the City streets. It was twelve noon, in the full tide of traffic, and the hot August sun beat down upon taxis and trucks and drays and red friendly buses. It also beat down with kindly impartiality upon the Gaiety, the Vaudeville, the Savoy, and the Adelphi theatres and I pictured the cool pre-matinée gloom of their interiors . . .'¹

I suggested earlier that the West End comic tradition, begun by Ben Jonson and his contemporaries, came to an end with Noel Coward and *his* contemporaries. But if we wish finally to settle upon a name with which to associate the close of this tradition (if it has in fact come to a close), I think we can do better than Noel Coward. We should look outside the theatre to prose fiction: the novels and stories of P. G. Wodehouse. Wodehouse's narrative technique is of course thoroughly theatrical; he himself was an expert writer of scripts and lyrics. But more perhaps than anyone since the early Thackeray, he has given a fresh mythopoeic currency to the idea of the West End. His earliest stories were appropriately published in the *Strand* magazine, to which he remained faithful until it closed down; and such titles as *A Gentleman of Leisure* (his first novel) and *Piccadilly Jim* (which is actually set in America) point to one of his persistent stamping-grounds. Bertie Wooster is the stylized, yet wholly convincing, apotheosis of the idle West End gentleman: perpetually young, unmarried, unworried about money, a life-member of the Drones Club, he habitually stays in bed of a morning as long as he pleases. Levee scenes are not infrequent in Wodehouse. *The Code of the Woosters* (1938) opens with one:

I reached out a hand from under the blankets, and rang the bell for Jeeves.

'Good evening, Jeeves.'

'Good morning, sir.' . . .

Wodehouse, himself an extraordinarily hard worker by any standards, is likely to have had mixed views on the affluent idlers of his fiction. Indeed one of his critics, Owen Dudley Edwards, goes further, finding in his early fiction particularly a critical attitude to his upper-class characters: ' . . . Wodehouse time and again returns to the theme of resolute and hard-working young men and women as a foil to aristocratic drones. . . . it is the bourgeois attack on the privilege and non-productivity of

¹ *Present Indicative* (1937), p. 101.

the aristocracy.¹ A divided response to the town gentleman is something we meet throughout this comic tradition, from Jonson and Beaumont onwards: a vicarious delight in his uninhibited style of life together with a never quite fully suppressed reserve or irritation at his freedom from the necessity to work: 'what is a gentleman but his pleasure?'

¹ *P. G. Wodehouse* (1977), pp. 69–70.