

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



The Knight of the Burning Pestle and the Menace of the Authoring Audience

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In Francis Beaumont's *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* (1607), the metadramatic Citizen and his wife Nell are clearly meant to offer an ironic and entertainingly chaotic element, but their constant interferingly critical observation of each passing scene suggests something more serious. Their intrusive presence in this play mirrors, I argue, a widely felt sense of continuous scrutiny by potential informers in early modern society and more particularly, a significant anxiety over the interpretation of the fictional world of the theatre. When Beaumont's alert Citizen finds 'abomination knavery in this play' (1.61), to which he is a very visible audience, his response is to utter darkly suggestive threats which cow the actors in the midst of their performance and place informing at the metadramatic centre of the audience's experience. Francis Lenton describes contemporary attitudes to the informer: 'As hee loues no man, so he is hated of all... Hee is the scum of Rascality... All men behold him with indignation.'¹ In Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* (1614), untrustworthy onstage audiences, as exemplified by the self-informing Justice Overdo, also suggest a concern with a general interpretative malaise. Jonson's onstage watchers seem very much cast in the mould of the interrupting citizens of his Mermaid Tavern companion Beaumont's metadrama. *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* stages a similar disjunction between interpretation and legitimate authority, centred around an audience which is empowered partly by the threat of informing. Jonson's onstage audiences are often allowed only ridiculous or overblown reactions, a kind of didactic dysfunction, while remaining entirely under the control of the author. In *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, however, the onstage audience are allowed a much more actively intrusive role, as they attempt to control both the writing and the

¹ Francis Lenton, *Characterismi: or, Lentons leasures* (London: I[ohn] B[eale] for Roger Michell, 1631). See also Bill Angus, *Metadrama and the Informer in Shakespeare and Jonson* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

production of the play they inhabit. Beaumont's play therefore stages a kind of dramatic authorship which seems to feel itself under siege by an unruly form of audience empowerment associated with informing.

The onstage presence of Beaumont's disruptive citizens might be perceived as merely playful in the generic context, but the menace of their threats has, like all good comedy, some basis in reality. In 'An Epistle to a Friend', Jonson expresses the concern that 'flatterers, spies, / Informers, masters both of arts and lies; / [are]... easier far to find / Than once to number.'² Jonson, imprisoned just three years previously with Chapman for *Eastward Ho*, was beleaguered by informers when inside, but this perception is borne out in wider society at the time, where there is a rising sense of the ubiquity of informers employed on an ad-hoc basis to feed administrations and individuals of influence with information on many aspects of life, as I have argued elsewhere.³ The potentially large payments that contemporary legislation specified for such information, with the informer potentially receiving a significant portion of the fine imposed, dangerously commercialises any detrimental interpretation such an informer desires to form.⁴ The profusion of metadramatic forms at this time registers dramatists' contemporary fears of the hidden watching, eavesdropping and tale-bearing which are associated with informers.⁵ Beaumont's dangerously intrusive citizens, straddling dramatic strata, may be exemplary in this respect.

The Knight of the Burning Pestle's metadramatic field of representative play and social commentary therefore shades into a more disturbing narrative where the figure of the informer lurks, as a significant element in the figuring of the audience and an authority which is tainted by the connection with such despised individuals. Contemporary metadrama often aims to manipulate the parameters of an audience's interpretation, a desire for control which suggests a defensive preoccupation with the boundaries and mechanisms of authority. In this way, the play's metadramatic structures are a window onto the strictures within which early modern authors like Beaumont feel themselves constrained to write.

² Ben Jonson, 'An Epistle to a Friend to Persuade Him to the Wars', in *Ben Jonson*, ed. by C. H. Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson, 11 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925–52), VIII, p. 167.

³ See Bill Angus, *Metadrama and the Informer*, p. 8 ff; Maurice W. Beresford, 'The Common Informer, the Penal Statutes and Economic Regulation', *Economic History Review* 10.2 (1958), 221-38 (pp. 232-3); G.R. Elton, *Policy and Police: The Enforcement of the Reformation in the Age of Thomas Cromwell*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972).

⁴ Beresford, 225.

⁵ See Angus, esp. pp. 1-24.

Within a culture permeated by the practice of informing, the shifting contemporary hierarchies of city authority may also at this time be perceived to be fostering ‘charlatans, liars and frauds’ as Janette Dillon says.⁶ This sense of unstable authority is carried onto the stage here in a metadramatic parody of audience engagement. The knockabout interplay of authorities in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* seems as much concerned with material jurisdiction as with the politics of dramatic representation. Thus, the Prologue enters and begins by situating the play geographically: ‘From all that's near the court, from all that's great / Within the compass of the city walls, / We now have brought our scene’ (Ind. 1-3).⁷ Beaumont’s Prologue is careful to distinguish city authorities from courtly ones by defining his own boundaries within the ‘compass of the city walls’. On one level, as Dillon also notes, the Citizen and his wife who comprise this onstage audience signify the city’s desire to intrude upon the Blackfriars’ liberty; this encroachment was finally granted by James in 1608, the year after the play’s first performance.⁸ At the time of the performance, however, the Blackfriars’ Dominican monastic past still rendered it free of city jurisdiction, lending a relatively safe ambiguity to the authoritative position of plays produced there. Bearing in mind these authoritative and geographical considerations, we encounter in this case an audience that crosses the boundaries of performance and representation and steps up into the world of the play itself, where states of watching and being watched are foregrounded as modes of subjectivity and authority. At the same time the contemporary offstage audience of 1607 is foregrounded metadramatically both explicitly, as a play-going audience with all its interpretative power, and implicitly in the negative onstage model of the citizens.⁹ The result of such metadrama is twofold, both giving a sense of the necessary negotiation between these sites of early modern narrative authority in the creation of meaning, and dramatising an implicit correlation between them. In this case, the shadow of the reviled informer that an onstage audience may conventionally harbour is further cast over the city authorities as a whole.

These issues are not limited to parodic *dramatis personae*, but seriously affect both the pressures of authorship and performance at the time. After its apparently conventional apologetic, making it explicit that ‘the author had no intent to wrong any one in this

⁶ Janette Dillon, *Theatre, Court and City 1595-1610*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 96.

⁷ Francis Beaumont, *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, ed. by Sheldon P. Zitner (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004). Unless otherwise noted, this is the primary text for all references to this play.

⁸ See Dillon, pp. 99-100.

⁹ For the purpose of this present argument, the ‘offstage’ audience is presumed to be that at the first performances. Subsequent audiences might well configure these issues differently, depending on their own circumstances.

comedy',¹⁰ in the printing at least, the play begins with a further familiar plea against misinterpretation drawn from John Lyly's *Sappho and Phao* (1584):

Where the bee can suck no honey, she leaves her sting behind; and where the bear cannot find origanum to heal his grief, he blasteth all other leaves with his breath. We fear it is like to fare so with us, that seeing you cannot draw from our labours sweet content, you leave behind you a sour mislike, and with open reproach blame our good meanings because you cannot reap the wonted mirth... We have endeavoured to be as far from unseemly speeches... as we hope you will be free from unkind reports or, mistaking the author's intention – who never aimed at any one particular in this play (Prol.1-7, 14-18).

This should not be dismissed lightly as a mere convention, since the nature of conventions is that they come to seem self-perpetuating, or even 'natural', when in fact their very conventionality often masks an ongoing political or material reality. Here the ground of contention is in a contrast which is drawn between the 'honey', 'sweet content', 'mirth', 'good meaning' and avoidance of 'unseemly speeches' which the author promises, and the potential 'sting', blasting 'breath', 'sour mislike', 'open reproach', 'unkind reports' and 'mistaking the author's intention' which he attributes to the audience. This is the 'fond and merely literal interpretation or illiterate misprision' (22-3) over which Walter Burre expresses his concern in the play's dedicatory epistle to Master Robert Keyzar.¹¹ With this in mind it is significant that a hostile audience is allowed onto the stage itself, bearing all of these menacing characteristics and potentialities with them.

The opening of the play comedically explores the nature of the offstage audience's authority as the interrupting Citizen enters from the audience and debates with the Prologue upon a fitting subject for the play.¹² Invading thus the space of the stage, the

¹⁰ Francis Beaumont, *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, 'To the Readers of this Comedy', ll. 8-9, p. 53.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 52.

¹² See Thomas Dekker, *The Gvl's Horne-Booke* (Menston: Scholar Press, 1969) for a humorous flavour of the oppositional character of these sites of authority: 'you that have authority under the broad scale of mouldy custom, to be called the "*gentle Audience*"... hiss, or give plaudities; I care not a nutshell which of either: you can neither shake our comic theatre with your stinking breath of hisses, nor raise it with the thunderclaps of your hands... As for thee, Zoilus, go hang thyself; and for thee, Momus, chew nothing but hemlock... you may abuse the works of any man; deprave his writings that you cannot equal; and purchase to yourself in time the terrible name of a severe critic' (p. 26). 'Zoilus' is the name of a Greek critic and grammarian (4th century B.C.) famous for his severe criticism of Homer, a censorious, malignant, or envious critic. See OED's quotation of R. Sheldon's 1612 *Sermon at St. Martin's* (47): 'Such as are eminent should be careful of their conuersations when they are besieged with such malicious

Citizen commands silence, and when asked what he means by this, replies, ‘That you have no good meaning: These seven years there hath been plays at this house; I have observed it, you have still girds at citizens, and now you call your play *The London Merchant*. Down with your title, boy’ (Ind. 6-9). This interjection relates directly to the prefatory apologetic: the Citizen questions the ‘good meaning’ which the Prologue has promised and accuses the house of having ‘girds at citizens’ which, he says, he has ‘observed’. Boundaries between dramatic fictions the two plays – *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* and *The London Merchant* – are thus destabilised, with the acting company struggling to perform their play in the face of the chivalric story requested by the onstage audience of the Citizen and his Wife, acted by their servant Rafe. This explicit representation of the audience is visible at all times in this play and acts as a constant self-referentially metadramatic mode throughout. Once the audience is established onstage, they frame an inner-narrative which they are then able largely to dominate. Initially, it is the jurisdiction of the city itself which is at stake here, and it is to this that the Prologue alludes as he questions the citizen’s social status as ‘a member of the noble city’ and a ‘freeman’ (Ind. 10, 12). The Citizen asserts that he is also a grocer, and the Prologue responds ‘So, grocer, then by your sweet favour, we intend no abuse to the city’ (Ind. 14-15). Standing outside the jurisdiction of the city authorities, this theatrical ‘we’ seems nevertheless to embody an authorship feeling the pressure of social forces beyond its control.

Throughout this play, the Prologue attempts to reassert theatrical control over a world in which authoritative representation seems to have become diffuse and promiscuous as the invasive audience continually requires an input into the authoring of the play, or at least to augment what is already there. When the Citizen demands that the play contain a grocer, his wife Nell, at this point still offstage, has her own idea for the narrative: ‘Let him kill a lion with a pestle, husband; let him kill a lion with a pestle’; the Citizen agrees: ‘So he shall, I’ll have him kill a lion with a pestle’ (Ind. 42-4). To ‘kill a lion with a pestle’ is, on one level, a figure of usurped authority; a triumph of the quotidian over the majestic. This image of the powerful pestle incorporates both the idea of a grocer’s guild and his wife’s specifically domestic sphere.¹³ With his wife now also on the stage, this metadramatic Citizen commands, ‘Boy, let my wife and I have a couple of stools, and then begin,’ and orders ‘let the grocer do rare things’ (Ind. 55-6). When the Prologue objects on the ground of a lack of actors, Nell has a further suggestion: ‘let Rafe play him. Beshrew me if I do not think he will go beyond them all’ (Ind. 59-60).

Zoiles.’ For Momus, OED notes: 1. a. The Greek god of censure and ridicule, who was banished from Olympus for his criticisms of the gods... b. A person who habitually grumbles or finds fault, a carping critic.

¹³ Wendy Wall, *Staging Domesticity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 162.

Thus Rafe, the couple's indentured serving man, having been accepted by the Prologue, also mounts the stage and crosses the boundary into the world of the drama, the Prologue promising him 'a suit of apparel if he will go in' (Ind. 87). This onstage audience therefore take on the additional roles of dramatic author and actor and, while Rafe exits to be costumed and thus be assimilated further into the dramatic frame, they continue to straddle representational boundaries, sitting upon their stools on the stage.

Thomas Dekker may well have had this play partly in mind in his contemporary parody of rank and convention, *The Gull's Hornbook* (1609), when he suggests that the fashionable place to be seen at the theatre was no longer above the tiring-house but 'on the very rushes where the comedy is to dance', a position simultaneously honoured, expensive, and ridiculed. As Dekker points out, such an onstage audience must be 'planted valiantly, because impudently, beating down the mewes and hisses of the opposed rascality.'¹⁴ He images one thus seated as either a 'feathered estrich' or a 'piece of ordnance' neatly encapsulating the extent to which such a position is fraught with ambiguities.¹⁵ Moreover, Dekker identifies reasons other than self-display for sitting on the stage; in this way, he adds, 'you have a signed patent to engross the whole commodity of censure, may lawfully presume to be a girder, and stand at the helm to steer the passage of scenes.'¹⁶ Just as *The Knight of the Burning Pestle's* metadramatic passages satirise the negotiation between the different sites of authority necessary to writing for the early modern stage, Dekker also satirises one practical method by which the author and the audience may be associated in this: 'if you know not the author, you may rail against him; and peradventure so behave yourself, that you may enforce the author to know you'.¹⁷ He further parodies the kind of authority which this spectatorial position affords by describing its correlation with both venal interpretative dissection of texts and bawdy tavern-talk:

By spreading your body on the stage, and by being a justice in examining of plays, you shall put yourself into such true scenical authority, that some poet shall not dare to present his muse rudely upon your eyes, without having first unmasked her, rifled her, and discovered all her bare and most mystical parts before you at a tavern.¹⁸

¹⁴ Thomas Dekker, *The Gull's Hornbook*, ed. by Ronald Brunlees McKerrow (New York: AMS Press, 1971), p. 50. E.K. Chambers suggests that this practice emerges around 1596: see E.K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1923), III, p. 535.

¹⁵ Dekker, *The Gull's Hornbook*, p. 50.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

This violent dis-covering of the secret parts of the poet's muse is reminiscent of the informers Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's 'faith her privates we' and reflects the distaste and fear with which such critical and informing 'private' practices were regarded in the dramatic community.¹⁹ The misogyny of these metaphors attaches to both the potentially misinterpreting audience and the implicit informer as incontinent users of language and inappropriate revealers of what should be concealed. The very public interpretative position of the onstage audience is, however, also one which produces only what Dekker caricatures here as 'scenical authority', and there is a danger inherent in occupying such an unstable place of representation which Dekker identifies:

whether you be a fool, or a justice of peace; a cuckold, or a captain; a Lord Mayor's son, or a dawcock; a knave, or an under-sheriff; of what stamp soever you be; current or counterfeit; the stage, like time, will bring you to most perfect light, and lay you open.²⁰

The stage here is itself presented as a catalyst for the exposure of what is hidden and thus acquires an authority resounding with the revelatory power its apologists might desire. Its propensity to lay open what is concealed, however, parallels the feared interpretative authority of the onstage audience, which demands the discovery of 'all [the muse's] bare and most mystical parts,' and the rifling of the poet's muse by this 'justice in examining of plays' is thus connected with both the incontinent tongue of the informer, which makes public what is 'private', and the idea of the theatre as moral arbiter for the nation.²¹

This is also very much a liminal position, between two fields of visual and auditory perception which metadrama often crosses. The onstage audience on the stools are both watchers and watched, but doubly so, both from the perspective of the actors and that of the offstage audience. It remains to be conjectured whether the dramatic onstage audience here may have shared that space with a real onstage audience, as was possible. If so, these may be the primary 'gentlemen' to which the onstage audience of actors occasionally refer, and would add an extra layer of dramatic structure. However, this would surely add a level of complexity to the performance that any professional company would have wished to avoid, and this present argument assumes that to be the

¹⁹ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (2.2.229), ed. by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (London: Arden, 2006).

²⁰ Dekker, *The Gull's Hornbook*, p. 51.

²¹ For the requisite silence of gentlewomen at this time see Richard Brathwaite, *The English gentlewoman*, (London: Printed by B. Alsop and T. Fauucet, for Michaell Sparke, 1631).

case. Either way, in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, the practice of stage-sitting is obviously being held up for public ridicule.

The offstage audience should be aware by this time that the Citizen and his wife are actors, setting up the whole area of dramatic practice as a spectacle of possible subversion by its audience. This happens whilst generating a dramatised audience whose unruly incursion is in fact scripted and therefore ultimately under the control of the author. With this in mind, it is worth considering the view of comic illusion which M.T. Jones-Davies describes as ‘not so much a question of belief or unbelief in a false reality as the acceptance of a theatrical convention making of the spectator an accomplice with the actors’.²² Here the sense of complicity is entirely compromised by the activities of the metadramatic onstage audience. As they disrupt both the inward pull of the offstage audience’s view and the diegetic strata of the narrative, the ‘illusions’ of the inner play become largely irrelevant to the performance and the Citizen and his wife are themselves the focus of attention. Although the offstage audience knows their metadramatic input is pre-scripted, this in no way tempers the negative model the citizens offer, a significant element of which is the implicit threat of informing which underlies their every interpolation. In this way the offstage audience is implicated in the depictions of informing occurring in the play and, given contemporary attitudes to informers, would certainly want to distance itself from this.

The Citizen and Nell make their first truly menacing hints of possible informing after the acting proper begins when, in the dramatic context, the frustrated lovers Jasper and Luce make plain that they have been scheming dramatically: ‘you know the plot / We both agreed on?’ and Luce declares that she will ‘will perform / [her] part exactly’ (1.56-8). When the alert Citizen asks ‘What a matter's here now? Well, I’ll be hanged for a halfpenny if there be not some abomination knavery in this play. Well, let ’em look to’t, Rafe must come’ he adds with a menacing pause ‘and if there be any tricks a-brewing—’ and Nell completes the thought, ‘Let ’em brew and bake too, husband, a’Gods name. Rafe will find all out, I warrant you’ (1.61-6). The couple’s response here is due to a mistaken perception that Jasper and Luce’s ‘plotting’ and that Luce’s performing of a ‘part’ is therefore inherently suspicious. The Citizen’s apprehension that there may be ‘some abomination knavery in this play’ is obviously parodic of over-zealous puritanical responses to such plays, like that of Zeal-of-the-Land Busy to *Bartholomew Fair*’s metadramatic puppet-show. Nell’s response to this is also

²² M.T. Jones-Davies, “‘The Players... Will Tell All,’ or the Actor’s Role in Renaissance Drama”, in *Shakespeare, Man of the Theater*, ed. by Kenneth Muir, Jay L. Halio, and D.J. Palmer (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1983), pp. 76-85 (p. 79).

characteristic of Justice Overdo's preoccupation with correct weights and measures in that play, and both obviously have specific expectations of Rafe in relation to their interpretation of the unfolding drama. In this fairly circumlocutory way, it is clearly implied that Rafe is, or has been, an informer: a discoverer of abominations and both responses suggest a culture suffused with informing. This may then be a significant element in the willing readiness of the players to have Rafe join them. The fact that it is plausible within the dramatic context that no objection is raised suggests an all-pervading atmosphere in which any reluctance to be open to observation signals guilt. Nell further draws attention metadramatically to the fictional nature of the whole performance, including her own, when she interrupts, questioning the actors: 'Were you never none of Mr. Monkester's Scholars?' (1.96-7). This allusion to Richard Mulcaster, whose students included Edmund Spenser, Thomas Kyd and Thomas Lodge, may be merely incidental, but it may allude to Mulcaster's rehabilitation of the acting company of Paul's Children who, for more than ten years after the season of 1589-90, had been banned from appearing in London, possibly for becoming involved in the Martin Marprelate controversy.²³ This would reinforce the underlying mistrust of the actors which these characters bring to the stage. As an allusion to a previous misdemeanour, its metadrama would also underline the material dangers inherent in an audience's interpretation.

The aggressive control of representation that such potential danger necessitates is depicted in various ways. When Rafe reappears, the metadramatic Citizen attempts to control the onstage activity by silencing his wife and advising Rafe on his delivery: 'peace fool. Let Rafe alone. – Hark you, Rafe, do not strain yourself too much at the first. – Peace! – Begin, Rafe' (1.213-15). Rafe then begins to deliver a part whose provenance is a text recently translated from the Spanish by Anthony Munday and which fits only tenuously with the main plot.²⁴ Depending upon whether the audience accepts that his part has been hastily written for him on demand, his piece about the lack of 'fair well-spoken knights in this age' (1.244-5) may play on the comedic idea of a character taking control of the narrative. Hence Rafe asks (and asserts, rhetorically), 'why should not I then pursue this course, both for the credit of myself and our company? For amongst all the worthy books of achievements, I do not call to mind that I yet read of a grocer errant. I will be the said knight' (1.259-62). The concept of a 'grocer errant' is of course a joke, but the idea of citizens and grocers exerting pressure on the processes of representation is plainly familiar enough to the early modern

²³ See Michael Shapiro, *Children of the Revels* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977) p. 21 ff.

²⁴ Antony Munday's *Palmerin D'Oliva*. See Arthur Kinney, *Renaissance Drama: An Anthology of Plays and Entertainments* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000) p. 397, n. 220.

audience to merit a parody of this kind. When Nell, needing reassurance at Rafe's self-assertion, asks, 'Do the gentlemen like Rafe, think you, husband?', the Citizen replies: 'Ay, I warrant thee, the players would give all the shoes in their shop for him' (1.280-3). Although this contains a pejorative reference to the players, a pun on both their status and their sexuality, the 'shoe' being both an example of an everyday piece of merchandise and a euphemism for female genitalia, Nell's primary metadramatic reference here is to the reaction of 'the gentlemen' of the offstage audience to Rafe's performance. Coming from a parodic simulation of an audience, this simultaneously foregrounds and undercuts the interpretative role of the real audience. As a supposed audience-member, Nell is taking on the concerns particular to the acting company, and the offstage audience are thus momentarily invited to consider this from both angles. In this case comedy does what comedy does best: it addresses with some bathos what is clearly an area of anxiety – here the potential consequences of the response of an audience to an actor upon the overall interpretation of the play.

At first, aside from Rafe and the Prologue, the actors themselves ignore the often quite considerable interjections of these disruptive metadramatis personae, as when Nell attempts to intervene in the Merrythoughts' marital wrangling and is pointedly ignored (3.542-61). However, after Jasper has beaten the hapless suitor Humphrey, Nell forces herself into the dramatic scene in comforting him physically, saying 'come hither, Master Humphrey. Has he hurt you?... Here, sweetheart, here's some green ginger for thee' (2.261-3). This marks a shift in the citizens' relationship to the dramatic action. Standing for the offstage audience, but able to comfort a fictional character, Nell's interaction with the universe of the play draws the real and fictional worlds into a commonality of experience. This sense of complicity may provide a persuasive apologetic, though that would depend upon the offstage audience's response to Nell's liminal position in this metadramatic structure. Sympathetic connection is again lost, however, when the critical Citizen again tries to rewrite the play to suit his and his wife's preferences and arrange revenge for the beaten Humphrey: 'I'll ha' Rafe fight with him, and swinge him up well-favouredly. – Sirrah boy, come hither. Let Rafe come in and fight with Jasper' (2.267-9). Moreover, when the boy objects that, 'the plot of our play lies contrary, and 'twill hazard the spoiling of our play' (2.271-2), the Citizen misconstrues his meaning and makes an oblique threat which is at the crux of the issue of metadrama and informing in this play: 'Plot me no plots. I'll ha' Rafe come out. I'll make your house too hot for you else' (2.273-4). This metaphor of heat is employed specifically as an informer's threat to the theatrical 'house' in which 'plots' are concocted, such as we have already seen, the implication being that the Citizen will claim to have discerned in the play some 'plot' against person, government or monarch. This is a threat felt deeply enough that the boy immediately acquiesces to the Citizen's

demands and draws the audience into the transaction: ‘Why, sir, he shall; but if any thing fall out of order, the gentlemen must pardon us’ (2.275-6).

It is at this juncture that the metadramatic strata which have been loosely maintained up to this point begin to break down. Having been ‘written in’ to the action by the Citizen, Rafe is, however, defeated by Jasper, who steals Rafe’s pestle. Jasper then draws attention to his own fictionality in a bizarre shift of register as he takes up the narration and declares of himself: ‘With that he stood upright in his stirrups, and gave the Knight of the Calfskin such a knock that he forsook his horse and down he fell, and then he leaped upon him, and plucking off his helmet’ (2.312-15). This narrative citation alludes to the metadramatic cast of the play as a whole as Rafe plays the Quixotic part of a questing knight mistaking ordinary things for the staples of heroic fiction. This also, however, has the effect of giving the rest of the play’s outer frames a less fictional aspect in relation to these clearly-defined textual references, drawing the offstage audience inwards to share the perspectives of the outer frames in which the onstage citizens dwell. Having the offstage audience share the perspective of the interrupting citizens might be counter-productive were it not that it is now, as the main plot and Rafe’s impromptu sub-plot begin to overlap and the Citizen and his wife begin to take a more direct control of the action. When Mistress Merrythought, who is very much a part of the main plot, comes onto the stage to move that part of the narrative forward, the Citizen and Nell object, as they are wanting the play to cut to the action between Rafe and a ‘giant’ he is about to fight: the Citizen says ‘good Mistress Merrythought, be gone, I pray you, for my sake... You shall have audience presently’ while Nell asks her, ‘refrain your passion’ (3.287-91).²⁵ Their persuasive authority here is based on their own growing presence not only as an inappropriately empowered audience but also actor-authors, and between them they are successful in sending her offstage again. They thus extend their influence directorially to include both the individual actor’s ‘passion’ and when he or she ‘shall have audience’. So, as the boy enters again, the Citizen once more commands him to alter the substance of the play to suit their preferences, this time by bringing on Ralph’s fight with the ‘giant’. Again the boy protests – ‘In good faith, sir, we cannot. You’ll utterly spoil our play and make it to be hissed, and it cost money. You will not suffer us to go on with our plot. – I pray, gentlemen, rule him’ (3.296-9). Here the boy appeals to the offstage audience, somewhat bizarrely, in order to control their own onstage avatars, these mistaking projections who are intent on shaping the production of the play, incidentally alluding again here to the double-meaning of ‘plots’, and the involvement of money in the whole process. Since the offstage audience

²⁵ The giant, Barbaroso is actually a barber whose ‘prisoners’ are syphilitics looking for a cure and in this regard it would be coy not to mention the quibbling value of the ‘burning pestle’ of the play’s title.

are aware by this stage that the onstage audience are actors, and therefore they have no control over them, this merely has the effect of confirming the author's overall command of this parodic representation.

Within these strictures, the authoring Citizen gets his way and the boy acquiesces once more in the understanding that the Citizen will not trouble him again. The couple are thus allowed an initially formal input which becomes increasingly dialogic until they become complicit in the very 'plotting' which causes the Citizen such a paranoid reaction in the first place, as located in the individual actor's expression of making the 'house too hot' for the players. In a sense also the citizens license the plot, since it only goes ahead at their allowance and to their personal tastes. In these ways, while metadramatically arresting the scopical pulsion of the offstage audience's view of the inner play, and thereby overseeing the narrative, the couple become more and more implicated in the dramatic process they might wish to threaten. After Rafe has defeated the giant and freed his captives, the Citizen assures his wife of Rafe's positive reception by the audience: 'Cony, I can tell thee the gentleman like Rafe'; Nell responds 'Gentlemen, I thank you all heartily for gracing my man Rafe, and I promise you you shall see him oft'ner' (3.459-62), now taking it upon herself to make promises to the offstage audience about future productions. This sense of interference may reference the potential for the city's expansion into this dramatic territory, figuring the city not only as belligerent audience but, in as much as it becomes an authoring authority, it is self-defeating.

The menacing nature of the citizens' authority as both authors and informers is further expressed as Nell orchestrates the reappearance of Mistress Merrythought, telling her, 'Now Rafe has done, you may go on' (3.478); Merrythought, meanwhile, is so angry at the conduct of her ignorant drunken husband that she protests to the Citizen who promises to do the job of the anonymous informer, advising: 'I have a trick in my head shall lodge him in the Arches for one year... and yet he shall never know who hurt him neither' (4.22, 25). The fact that the position of authoring interpreter is empowered by its volatile potential to develop into the position of the informer is alluded to all along in this play and here the correlation between metadramatic structures and an informing audience is made explicit. This is a key moment in the metadramatic foregrounding of the audience and reveals some factual knowledge of the prospective activities of informers and their possible consequences. The 'Arches' is a reference to the ecclesiastical Court of Arches, situated in the crypt of St Mary-le-Bow under the jurisdiction of the Archbishop of Canterbury, one of the possible outlets for incriminating information. The Court of the Arches is mentioned in the *Diary of Mal Cutpurse* (1662), also with reference to the activity of an informer, where she complains

that ‘some Promooting Apparator... cited me to appear in the Court of the Arches, where was an Accusation exhibited against me.’²⁶ In this case, Nell shows her own potential for complicity in the process as she is clearly in full agreement with the Citizen’s proposal (4.26).

Eventually, however, things fall apart when the narratological demands of these interloping authors and potential informers become unwieldy, with Nell demanding, that Rafe

travel over great hills, and let him be very weary, and come to the King of Cracovia’s house, covered with velvet, and there let the King’s daughter stand in her window, all in beaten gold, combing her golden locks with a comb of ivory, and let her spy Rafe and fall in love with him (4.33-8).

Although the Boy seizes upon this as an opportunity to comment upon the ridiculously misconceived nature of the couple’s authorly role, nevertheless the play action shifts momentarily to Moldavia. Here, however, their demands proliferate: ‘let Rafe come out on May Day in the morning and speak upon a conduit, with all his scarfs about him, and his feathers and his rings and his knacks’ (Interlude 4, 9-12). The boy responds still cautiously, ‘Well, sir, he shall come out. But if our play miscarry, sir, you are like to pay for’t’ (Int. 4.19-20), reminding the Citizen and Nell of the consequences of their interjections and amendments, foregrounding the economics of the relationship between the dramatic producers and their audience.

Regardless of the metadramatic permeability of the acting-space, the play itself seems to offer resistance to these interlopers into its perimeters. In all, the sub-narratives that the citizens engender through their intrusive audience-participation turn out to be blank ends. The relatively marginal roles that Rafe is asked to play lead nowhere significant, and he never gets to kill his lion. As the play ends, his ‘part’ has come to nothing, and the Boy rightly blames this on the couple’s destructive authorship of the inner performance, saying ‘’tis long of yourself, sir; we have nothing to do with his part’ (5.279-80). Even the fact that the couple therefore decide that Rafe’s ‘knight’ should have at least a dramatic death, the Boy’s objection that ‘’twill be very unfit he should die, sir, upon no occasion, and in a comedy too’ (5.286-7) going unheeded, simply means that Rafe’s inner-play character dies at the whim of what is a lethally authorial audience. Overall, although they exert a critical pressure on the content of the drama

²⁶ ‘Mal Cutpurse’s Diary’, from *Counterfeit Ladies: The Life and Death of Mary Frith; The Case of Mary Carleton*, ed. by Janet Todd and Elizabeth Spearing (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1994), pp. 33-4.

and share a menacing oversight connected with the figure of the informer, this metadramatic onstage audience, subsumed into the object of its own critique, are finally found to be ‘complicit with the transgressiveness they seek to police’, as Dillon puts it, and are thus rendered harmless.²⁷ The conventional plea for applause is left to Nell, who leaves the stage, presumably back into the audience of the city from which she came, taking the unstable authority of the informer and the undesirable model of the authoring audience with her.

The Knight of the Burning Pestle thus uses its explicit metadramatic forms to stage malconnections between various jurisdictions of social and theatrical authority. The success of its metadrama rests upon its reference to a sense of the potential for miscommunication between the producers and the receivers of dramatic representation. The violent possibilities implied by the casual inclusion of the threat of the informer in even these light entertainments form a sinister element in these problematic connections. As a parody of the intended expansion of city authority, *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*’s metadramatic interlopers signify the fear of the genuinely dangerous properties of venal interpretation and misheld authority. Even though the plots of Beaumont’s *Citizen and his wife* ultimately come to nothing, the end result is a theatrical form which accurately reproduces the critical atmosphere of the drama and of the material context of its production. In offering this Beaumont reveals the precarious nature of his own authority in relation to that of a potentially informing audience. As it turns out, the common entreaty against misconception by the bee who ‘leaves her sting behind’, or the bear who ‘blasteth all other leaves’ because he ‘cannot find origanum’, in fact resonates with the implicit threat of humiliating and potentially debilitating prosecution at places like the Court of Arches, or worse. This metadrama registers, in both form and content, not only the properties of illegitimate authority, but also the solid fear that ‘sour mislike’, and ‘open reproach’ of ‘unseemly speeches... mistaking the Author’s intention’ by informers may lead not only to ‘unkind reports’, but also ultimately to the horrors of the early modern gaol.

²⁷ Dillon, p. 108.