

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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***The Knight of the Burning Pestle* (1607)**

Francis Beaumont

OVERVIEW

Literary background The present play is the first whole parody play to be performed in England, and as such, obviously, marks a sharp contrast with the far more straightforward dramatic theater, to which the London audience was accustomed. (We are, in other words, approaching a time when theater will have frankly and exclusively adopted the function of entertainment.) The heart of the present play is a satire on chivalric culture, that late mediaeval culture style which hung on after the High Middle Ages, well into the English Renaissance. In the course of this depiction, however, Beaumont adds unexpected twists to the development of modern stagecraft. Our attention is alerted, at every point here, to the parallels between this play—its general attitude—and Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1605/1615) These works of cultural satire stand out in their time as bold efforts both to demarcate their own time, to define the time they no longer are, and to herald in, with subtle care, an era future to them. Satire is the name of the genre of writing in which we are working when we undertake these efforts to place our cultural selves in our unique moment.

CHARACTERS

Speaker of the prologue
A citizen (George)
His wife (Nell)
Rafe (his apprentice)
Boys
Venturewell, a merchant
Humphrey
Old Merrythought
Michael Merrythought, his son
Jasper Merrythought, another son
Host of an Inn
Tapster
Barber
Three Men, supposed captives
Sergeant
William Hammerton
George Greengoose
Soldiers, and attendants
Luce, Daughter of Venturewell
Mistress Merrythought
Woman, supposedly a captive
Pompiona, daughter of the King of Moldavia
Susan, cobbler's maid in Milk Street

SYNOPSIS

The ground level The remarkable opening of the play arouses our question, to what kind of genre does the present play belong? The play seems to bear traces of the city comedy, spoofs on class in the Renaissance culture world. There is also the satire on trendiness, like the preoccupation with a chivalric age which was long past, except as a relic. At the same time we scent, here, that kind of ancient Greek comedy which opens with a citizenry taking its early morning seats in the theatre of Athens, clamoring for the play to start, and airing its opinions in advance of any action.

Watching a play in a play The setting is in London, and we are gathered to watch a performance of *The London Merchant*. At this point pop up, from within the audience, a Citizen and his wife, complaining, in advance, that the play they are about to watch will not be relevant to the middle class life which they live, and is which demanding representation in the present play. They of theirs. Rafe recites some Shakespeare, as proof of his dramatic ability, and is taken on into the play as a Grocer Errant, bearing on his shield the heraldic device of a burning pestle. The reference to Quixote is perfect. A second reference, of a burning pestle to a penis afflicted with syphilis, further widens the scope of artistic audacity which trademarks this work.

Development and details The intricacy, and the modernity, of the play are hereby announced. The key to the melding, of the two plot lines, will be turned when the merchant's apprentice falls in love with the merchant's daughter, Luce. That move of heart coincides with a decision of Mrs. Merrythought to leave her husband Merrythought—the merchant of the primary play. In essence, the following stage can be summarized: Mrs. Merrythought finds herself preoccupied with the safety of her daughter, whom in her own ladylike distress she is anxiously eager to protect from the advances of an unwanted suitor. Rafe enters the picture strongly here, eager to be of service to a damsel in distress. Is he bringing to bear, on the tangled situation before him, the very romantic attitude against which Madame Citizen spoke in the first place, when she asked for a play which would reflect middle class values?

The grocer errant The progress of the play is assured by the peripeties of Mme. Merrythought, who, having left her drinking and gambling husband, is in flight with her son—whom she has reassured by telling him of the valuable jewels she is carrying with her, and which will sustain them in their flight. At this point of flight and anxiety the grocer errant comes upon the fleeing Merry thoughts—mother and son—in whom he sees an opportunity to display his own chivalric skills, the motivational launch, after all, for his own dramatic entrance into the play. The development of Rafe's chivalric mission, which seems infused in him by the faith of the citizens, meets with a mercantile—not a chivalric -- response from an innkeeper, whom Rafe has helped lodge at a local hostelry, and who wants to be paid for lodging the Merrythoughts overnight. The inn keeper suggests an alternate work of charity to which the grocer might direct his chivalric attentions. This time it is a question of a certain barber. This evil practitioner is devoted to treating venereal diseases. It seems that Rafe intervenes by rescuing several of Barbarosso's patients. The satire—of the chivalric, the medical nostrum, and the mercantile spirit are wrapped into one bundle here

The satire Many ploys of satire dominate here. The play opens on the naïve outburst of Mme. Citizen, clamoring for a theater which will represent the kind of life she and her family live. Rafe will be her representative, a Grocer errant, who will both hark back to the mediaeval days—with his burning pestle halberd—and who will thus confuse the end statement of the ultimate desires of the little man in the society. The telos of all this audience longing is perplexing enough to remind us of the complex and formative view points of the still very present Shakespearian theatrical cachet. The classical is still an ideal, but the indwelling spirit is far too volatile to be captured by commonplaces. The audience is a true participant in the play, this time, as perhaps it was in the present author's youth.

The denouement At this point the citizen and his wife, who had voiced the request for theater close to daily life, find themselves votaries of the chivalric, and chafe that the narrative unfolding around them is too commonplace; they demand more romantic adventures for their theatric representative, Rafe. It is, of course, the responsibility of the directors of the play, like the merchant Venturewell, to see to the tastes of the straightforward merchant tranche of the audience, and yet the audience, the two Citizens loudly among them, demand their portion of dramatic romance. Rafe is accordingly sent to Moldavia in which obscure country a beautiful princess falls in love with him, only to yield, in the end, to the lasting charms of Susan, a cobbler's maid back home in Milk Street. The princess allows Rafe to leave her country, though with great reluctance, for she has long wanted to see England and taste English beer.

Reminders The last elements of the play involve bringing to a close the separation between Mr. and Mrs. Merrythought, and resolving the romantic tumult shaking Jasper Merry-thought and Luce, the daughter of Merry-thought. At the request of Mr. and Mrs. Citizen, who have inspired the innovative idea

of this mixed play, Rafe is permitted to participate in a culminating, and of course tragicomic death scene. The final remainder is the sense of satirical undercutting, which remains as the play fades away. The pretense that the play is a natural narrative rather than a brokered artifice is dismantled. We know that it is an artifice. We allow the performers, intent on their own limitations, to create complex and unrealistic scenarios. The merchant middle class is satirized for the kind of preoccupation with dollars and cents marriages, which takes up the bulk of the drama.

SCENES

Rafe, an apprentice to Mr. and Mrs. Citizen, is brought to life by the will of those art-parents, who are plainly speaking for a level of audience boredom, such as the *London Merchant* play which they are attending. What do these two citizens want? On the one hand it seems to be life styles they recognize and are familiar with, while on the other hand it is the romantic and chivalric that they are looking for

This pre-plot is intercut into the play of the evening, *The London Merchant*. We enter the world of Jasper Merrythought, a merchant's apprentice. He is in love with his master's daughter, Luce, and is in a hurry to elope with her, to save her from marriage to Humphrey, a fashionable city man.

Luce arranges to run away with Jasper, abandoning Humphrey. (Cannot one hear the gears of boredom turning in the audience's ears?) Meanwhile the citizen and his wife demand more adventures for Rafe. These adventures will then 'run parallel' to the adventures involving Rafe's transposition to Moldavia. It is not that there is a resolution of these parallel strands of story, but rather that there is no resolution.

The play draws to a close as Mrs. Merrythought returns to her husband, Old Man Merrythought forgives the merchant, and the merchant consents to Jason's marriage to Luce. What more disaligned could follow this sequence of events than the comic opera death of Rafe, holding aloft a burning pestle which is itself a mockery of the classic shield of arms worn by the mediaeval knight?

The 1941 musical comedy, *Hellzapoppin*, introduced the scribe of the present analysis to his first audience-participatory drama. He remembers clearly how transgressive it seemed to find fellow audience members bursting out into song, or into ridicule of the play on stage or even onto details of the outfits of fellow audience members. The stage lost something of its archaic dignity, gaining however a flexibility for new meanings ...and antics.

THEMES

Deception: drama as artifice In our own day we have grown acquainted with a challenging literary aesthetic, the determining theme of which is that art is after all made to believe, artifice, and art making a network of strategies in imagination. The theory of *mimesis*, Aristotle's key term for the working process in the poetic arts, was once supposed to describe the way in which the poet 'holds the mirror up to nature.' The behavior of the two Citizens, at the outset of the present play, seems to be the voice of the playwright, reminding us that a play is an artifice which the playwright and his audience construct. More characters could be added, more plot turns introduced.

Culture: Reigning historical trends An important shaper of the present play is the presence of social attitudes toward the proper material and treatment of the stuff of drama. In the present drama the cry goes up that the play should deal with middle class life, the material of what was at the time called City drama, built around what was at that pre modern time being seen as standard middle class life. There is also a strong voice, Rafe's, speaking for the romantic chivalric tradition. The artifice of the play unfolds under the aegis of dominant theatrical trends. Such, we will want to say, will have been the universal backdrop under which drama has always and everywhere been unfolded.

Delusion The Knight of the Burning Pestle is himself a tissue of fantasies of his own romantic and chivalric nature. The Romantic in literature is full of delusions, for the works of the imagination are meant to deceive. What could be more startling than the move of the citizen and his wife to demand a more exotic adventure for Rafe, in the continuation of the play. (What and from whom is this will of the citizen

and his wife? Are they 'of imagination all compact?' Or are they 'ordinary citizens'? The nature of the delusion integral to the play is irregular and pre modern but clearly part of an aesthetic inquiry to which we are somewhat unprepared, coming from the more objectively imaginative texts of such as Dante and Chaucer.