

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## ***Bartholomew Fair*** (1614)

Ben Jonson

### OVERVIEW

#### Background

From 1133 until 1855 Bartholomew's was one of the preeminent London summer fairs. It opened on August 24 each year at Smithfield in the northwest part of London—in an area of slaughterhouses and executions. One must think of such fairs as conglomerations of business, small trades, money lenders, shysters with dirty deals, plus of course entertainment, everything from bear baiting to hobbyhorse selling, and often a play or puppet show built in. These were venues, of course, at which every kind of mischief was carried out, from cut pursing to murder, in which whores wandered prolifically, grand thefts were sketched out, and political crimes negotiated in the dark lanes filled with taverns. One might think of a Breughel scene, erupting with color, raw emotions, jollity and booze. The play which Jonson created, around this tumultuous scene, is daring and experimental, and a vivid testimony both to an historical moment and to Jonson's capacity to transform history.

#### The Prologue to the play

The stage keeper enters complaining about the play, for its lack of romantic or fabulous qualities. It is too prosaic. This man is in turn pushed aside by the book keeper, who appears to explain the contract which the author has drawn up between himself and the audience. That contract is echt Jonson, doing away with chivalry and swords, knights and ladies, fabulous realms and concentrating on the reality of the fair itself. The innuendoes: the audience is requested to forget political plots or innuendos and to use their own judgments and common sense. We are at a crossroads between an ancient and a contemporary aesthetic.

### CHARACTERS

Adam Overdo. Is a justice of the peace, who believes that he can best do his job, of scoping out evil, by adopting disguises and observing behaviors up close. One of his disguises is that of a mad preacher—at which he proves a poor detective. Next, he disguises himself as a porter, to attend the puppet play. At the end, having survived many jokes, having found his wife dead drunk, he invites everyone to his house for a celebration. This is the classic comedic resolution.

The Author of the play is the one who wrote it, but is accused by the stage-keeper of presenting a pale image of the actual fair. A rough and tumble argument ensues, in which very contemporary (to us) issues of art and reality and imagination are aired. The author urges the audience to be comfortable with the fact that art is different from reality. He does insist, though, that he brings onto the stage a 'real' Justice of the peace, hog, 'a civil cutpurse, a singer of ballads.'

Book holder; a character and a prompter in the introduction. He claims to have been sent by the Author to describe the new contract which the author wishes to make with them.

Bristle is a watchman at the Fair. He is a law and order figure, preoccupied with any number of efforts to commit people to or keep them in the stocks.

Master Brome, a servant in the play, is also a playwright.

Busy, Zeal of the Land, is a Puritan from Banbury, and a suitor of Dame Purecraft. Busy speaks openly about the evils of the pleasures of the world, but enjoys his share of them under cover. At the Fair, for instance, Busy is inseparable from the Littlewit family, preaches against the pleasures of the flesh, but is the most conspicuous devourer of pork—an item religiously forbidden to the Puritans.

Batholomew Cokes, a gentleman from Harrow, is soon to be married to Grace Wellborn in the beginning Cokes comes to Littlewit's house to retrieve his wedding license. Cokes is a perfect victim of robbery at the Fair, and in general a country gull who fills in the background.

Coster monger, in this instance a pear seller. He is the victim of a dirty Fair game, by which he is tripped, loses his tray of pears, and has his sword and cape stolen, all in one swoop. Cokes and Nightingale run away from the booty taken from Coster monger.

Cunning man is a fortune teller, who predicted Dame Purecraft's future. He said she would marry a madman within the week, and in fact she ended up with Quarlous, who wooed her under the disguise of the mad man, Trouble all.

Val Cutting, a rascal and madcap deeply involved with the puppet play. He comes on as a 'roarer,' a thief's bully or decoy. Boozing and brawling is his milieu.

Dame Purecraft is a rich widow, mother of Win Littlewit, and the object of much money hungry amorous attention. She takes her daughter to all the ins and outs of the Fair, and comes out of it, not too surprisingly, married, to Quarlous.

Davy, a hallowed figure of Fair lore. He is famed for his presence as a bouncer, a scatterer of bawds.

Ezekiel Edgeworth, is a con man and a cutpurse. His ingenuity as a pickpocket brings him, of course, into contact with everybody, honest or crooked, in the fair.

Filcher, a doorkeeper at the theater. When the author of the play arrives at the theater, to watch the puppet play, Filcher lets him in free.

Grace Wellborn is Adam Overdo's ward. Engaged to be married to Bartholomew Cokes, she is disgusted by the prospect of marriage to such a fool. (The alternative is the loss of all her land.) As it plays out, Grace avoids becoming the wedded wife of Quarlous, and is given away by the Justice of the Peace, whose ward she is.

Toby Haggis is one of the Fair watchmen, With the responsibility of putting suspects or criminals in the stocks. When one of his colleagues fails to close the gate to the stocks Haggis fears that ut us a question if witchcraft. He runs away.

James I King of England. The king is referred to both at the outset of the play, and at the conclusion. The King was in the audience of the first performance of the play.

Jordan Knockem, a horsetrader and cutpurse.

Leatherhead, a hobby horse dealer.

Madman. Master Overdo, the Justice of the Peace, disguises himself as a madman so that he can move secretly around the Fair and observe any improper behavior.

Nightingale is a singer of ballads who offers up songs throughout the Fair. He works closely with the purse snatcher, Edgeworth, with whom he collects stolen goods which he packs away in Ursula's booth.

Troubleall, in the end the lucky husband of Dame Purcraft, but who is otherwise a clumsy loser, who knows both sides of the underworld.

## SYNOPSIS

The play opens onto a proctor and amateur dramatist, Littlewit, and some of their friends: they are plotting to free Dame Purecraft from marriage to Zeal-of-the-land Busy, an extremely loud mouthed Puritan. We are aware of the presence of intense religious conflict. The group, which have gathered to collect a marriage license then decides to go on to the Fair. It will be a chance for Littlewit—who has written a puppet play for the occasion-- to see his play performed. It comes out, as they prepare to leave, that Busy—the mocked Puritan hypocrite can't wait to get to the stand where roast pork is being sold.

Once inside the Fairgrounds, all bets are off. Two of the visitors get robbed, beaten, and are thrown in the stocks, which, along with the puppet theater and a few stands, becomes a kind of verbal landmark for the ongoing events. (Those events are retailed in small chunks, as we pass from one dark booth to another, through one alley into the next. Everywhere, on all sides, we follow snatches of conversation from the main participants in the play as well as from the little guys heard in passing). Justice Overdo circulates in disguise; Wasp steals the much coveted marriage license; Win Littlewit and Mistress Overdo are recruited as prostitutes by the pimp Whit and he is put in the stocks; all the prisoners escape from the stocks, when Trouble All, gone mad or faking it, fights with the guards and throws open the gates.

The puppet show, which brings about the grand finale, is itself based on two classic but folk reinterpreted, literary pastiches: Hero and Leander, always a tear jerker for the way it joins love and death, and Damon and Pythias, a timeless celebration of friendship. It can be imagined that the show ends in several kinds of drunken brawl, very little attention to fine points of literature, and in fact addressed at the very end to the now trendy topic of cross dressing. Justice Overdo, still dressed in his own disguise, surveys the scene and describes it as a moral abomination. Busy, the loud Puritan, interrupts declaring the supreme outrage of the play is the cross-dressing of the actors. (A long story: after a tradition of many decades at just his time being, women were being allowed to perform on stage as women, as their own selves; in the present instance the puppets refute Overdo, raising their gowns and showing no sex but wood.)

## SCENES

**The prologue** The prologue is opened on a note of frank congeniality with the audience. The prologuer gives his frank opinions about the weaknesses of the play you are about to see. He is then pushed aside by the book keeper of the theater, who explains what kind of contract he has made with the audience. He explains that Jonson intends—as he had in *Everyman in his Humor*—to speak as people do on the streets, and about ordinary things that happen on the streets. One overhears rumors of a distant Wordsworth, anxious as he was to speak the speech of common men.

**Intervention** The action proper begins with the guests who have stopped in at Littlewit's house, to get a marriage license. The generally agreed on hot collar issue is how to keep Mrs. Purecraft from falling into a marriage with the ultra Puritan Busy. They succeed for Dame Purecraft ultimately marries Quarulous.

**Justice Overdo** In his zeal to 'clean up City Hall' this important magistrate is forever getting himself into trouble—beaten by Wasp, falsely accused by Edgeworth, the cutpurse, then thrown into the stocks. Rough and tumble enough to survive all this, the Justice reacquires freedom when the gate to the stocks is left open. He seems no much the worse for wear.

**Purecraft and Troubleall** Jonson shows us the unpredictable in romance and marriage by bringing together Dame Purecraft, the wealthy widow, with the wild card Troubleall, who is forever disruptive and quarrelsome, who regularly feigns madness, and who of all performers is perhaps not interested in Purecraft's money.

## THEMES

**Hypocrisy** In an age of religious tensions, when two opposing sides are bent on proving their moral superiority, it is no surprise that partisans of both sides—Catholics and Protestants, fans of war, fans of peace—should aspire to display their particular faith and to provide convincing models of that expression. Faith at its highest level of development. Busy, zeal of the Land, is a fine example of that kind of hypocrisy, decrying the evils of the world, but inseparably passionate for a good hunk of pork.

**Disguise** Disguise and hypocrisy go together, for hypocrisy is a disguising of one's nature. In order to seem to be someone else. Disguise too is an effort at playing someone else; the two moves in psyche are closely interrelated. Bartholomew Fair teems with instances of disguise, in each case to serve private purposes. Justice Overdo regularly conceals his judicial role in order to snoop unseen, and detect crimes. Quarlous disguises himself so that he can check out women and deals.

**Religion** Religious conflict breathes at the Fair. The Puritans have fallen out of favor, the era of King James has restored the monarchy, and the good old life of robust styles and free expression has reasserted itself. The Puritans are comfortably held up to mockery, and in this play we see this broad ridicule directed at Dame Purecraft and at Busy zeal of the Land, who are not only Puritans but hypocrites, in this instance. Busy particularly stands out for the conflict between his condemnation of the lewd vulgarity of the Fair, but for his delight in the roast pork—a forbidden food item—with which he is gorged at the fair. Dame Purecraft comes out of the fair married to Quarlous, the lucky one who buys into her substantial fortune.

**Class** Class is always an element in the composition of the early modern drama. (The same was true in ancient theater, although it was only after the Hellenistic period, with the Mimes of Herondas, that we are made keenly aware of the class differences among the participants of the play. The pimp, the whore, the whoremaster, the bailiff all become stock stand ins for universal types and class representatives. In classical Greek drama, especially when we return to Aeschylus, the characters appear divested of a social setting, or at most part of the mythical family setting, as in the Oresteia.) At Bartholomew Fair there is a communion of all classes, furiously themselves, each one, but melded in the rich brew of diversity.

**Culture** It is significant that the climax of the Fair days is the puppet show, which Littlewit has written for the occasion. The drama is there to support the audience taste for sentimentality—both of the thematic shows embrace tear jerking events and mixtures of love and friendship—but for more than that. Busy, for one, is converted into a 'beholder of plays,' after his brief encounter with the arts, and the artistic experience seems to have spread out into a culture wide redemptive conclusion. After the play's end a rough and tumble kind of transcendence settles onto the audience. There is a kind of high spirited resolution generated by Justice Overdo's desire to punish the many miscreants we have been observing at the play. A reverse English seems to settle down over the fair going folk, and the old thrill of joy, resonating back to the spring festivals of ancient rural Greece, is felt in the community. Marriages occur as if spontaneously: Winwife marries Grace; Quarlous marries Purecraft, and of course everyone is invited over to Overdo's house for supper. Jonson leaves us with the sense that the world of Bartholomew Fair is but a moment in historical Time, and will pass quickly, benignly.