

**Thwarting Social Ideology through a Fusion of Fact and Fiction:  
An Analysis of Francis Beaumont's *The Knight of the Burning Pestle***

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Author:  
Kristin Bennett

Faculty Sponsor:  
Glenn Steinberg  
*Department of English*

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**ABSTRACT AND INTRODUCTION**

Francis Beaumont's *Knight of the Burning Pestle* presents seemingly conflicting, ultimately complementary class-specific points of view. In this play-within-a-play, Beaumont's audience expects to see a conventional drama, *The London Merchant*, which is disrupted when Nell and George introduce a plot of their own, *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*. Both plots, despite George and Nell's lower status and theatrical naïveté, are informed by similar characters and themes. Employing what Mikhail Bakhtin calls the carnivalesque, Beaumont creates a world in which "realistic" boundaries of time and space break down. The play questions social distinctions, instead emphasizing a universal humanity obscured by these divisions.

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Dana Aspinall argues that Nell and George reflect Bakhtin's concept of the "grotesque" – the socially unacceptable – and that Beaumont intends to ridicule them to defend the socially acceptable plot of *The London Merchant* (170-71). By contrast, Lee Bliss contends that Beaumont uses George and Nell to critique all classes. They demonstrate the importance of imaginative freedom and personal connections to the theater (Bliss 3-21).

Indeed, most recent criticism of *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* speculates on the social meaning of Beaumont's work. During the 17<sup>th</sup> century, although many treated class divisions as absolute, they were rather arbitrary. From highest to lowest, there was a hierarchy: "Gentlemen, Clergy and Professions, Merchants, Tradesmen and Craftsmen, Yeomen, Husbandmen, and Labourers and Servants" (Cressy 35). In the middle, "merchants engaged in international trade were superior to home merchants," although closely ranked (35-37). In Beaumont's play, the merchant, Venturewell, and his apprentice, Jasper, are treated as vastly superior to grocers George and Nell; yet, in reality, these classes were only minutely different.

During the Elizabethan era, theatrical material appealed to all classes. However, "As class consciousness increased, certain . . . plays began to appeal more . . . to the elite, while . . . other plays were pitched to . . . commoners. James I [increased] social differentiation in the drama, which . . . ultimately in the Restoration [drove] . . . the citizen from the theater" (Wright 608). The theater became what Louis Althusser calls as an ideological state apparatus, supporting the "imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (693). Seventeenth-century Protestantism, for example, claimed that social rank was determined by God (Wright 176). As an imitation of life, theater created a reality that often supported the existing social system.

*The London Merchant*, which frames *Knight*, follows the conventions of the exclusive, private theater, depicting the upper-middle class in a familiar, formulaic plot (Bevington 1067). Beaumont's play begins with a very static, concrete, linear chronotope, or system of time and space (Bakhtin, *Forms* 84). The Prologue claims that the play purposes "to move inward delight, not outward lightness, / And to reed (if it might be) soft smiling, not loud laughing" (lines 8-9). It will comply with the socially and theatrically acceptable conventions of private theater; decorum will trump the "loud" laughter of public theater.

But Beaumont interrupts the Prologue's introduction with the plot of grocer George and his wife, Nell, who emerge from an audience to which they do not belong. Unfamiliar with private theatrical

etiquette, they walk on stage and attempt to replace *Merchant* with their own new play. George and Nell behave like Bakhtinian fools, creating “around themselves their own special little world, their own chronotope” (Bakhtin, *Forms* 159). From the moment George demands that the company “present something notably in honor of the / Commons of the city” (Intro 26-27), the citizens subvert the private theater’s conventions with their own understanding of time and space.

Disappointed with *Merchant*’s depiction of common people, George and Nell “re-emplot,” or upset the course of events with their own chronotope which respectfully represents their own social class. As Lee Bliss observes, the citizens question the “traditional ideal of drama as a clarifying mirror of men and their relation to their world” (4). Rather than mirroring man, private theater, it turns out, manipulates him to suit social expectations.

Thus, George and Nell anticipate that their servant, Rafe, will outshine all of the actors: “I’ll tell / you, gentlemen, let them but lend him a suit of repanel / and necessities, and by Gad, if any of them all blow wind in the / tail on him, I’ll be hanged” (Intro 63-66). Simply by changing clothes, Rafe becomes the Knight of the Burning Pestle, leaving behind his lower class origins. He does not conceal his identity, but names himself “in remembrance of [his] former trade” (1.3. 53), his title comically confusing class distinctions.

The cast of *The London Merchant* resists the citizens’ re-emplotment. In Act II, for example, George and Nell demand that Rafe return to the stage. A boy responds, “Sir, you must pardon us. The plot of our play lies contrary / and ‘twill hazard the spoiling of our play” (2.4.59-60), to which George replies, “Plot me no plots. I’ll ha’ Rafe come out” (2.4. 61). George and Nell reject a socially acceptable, ordered plot for one based on their momentary desires (Bliss 4). The boy apologizes to the upper class, “but if anything fall out of order, the / gentlemen must pardon us” (2.4.63-64). While private theater strives to maintain order, the citizens’ chronotope captures “life’s unpredictable vitality in . . . generic form” (Bliss 20).

Like Bakhtin’s “fool,” the citizens disrupt theatrical order. As Bliss explains, “For George and Nell . . . drama is as fresh and real as life” (8). Their experience locates them outside the conventions of private theater. By replacing the presented chronotope with their own, George and Nell make Beaumont’s work carnivalesque, straddling “the borderline between art and life” (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 7). Indeed, they break down the wall separating audience from stage and so confound fiction with reality. “Carnival is not a spectacle to be seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates” (8). The citizens respond directly to the fictional plot, moving from audience to stage and mingling the real with the fantastic. The theater, as Lee Bliss notes, becomes “a place where the imagination seeks its own ends, satisfies its hunger to transform . . . reality and explore its own . . . powers” (10-11). In the process, the social agenda of the private theater becomes individual and personal.

The citizens cannot differentiate the characters from the actors. In Act II, while watching a scene between Humphrey and Venturewell, Nell interrupts, “Sirrah, didst thou ever see a prettier child?” (1.2.21), directly addressing the actor playing Humphrey. Nell does not see the fictional mask that the theatrical space demands but a “pretty child.” By so doing, she breaks the play’s chronotope. The characters are deprived of the “suspended disbelief necessary to establish the special time and space in which drama can operate” (Bliss 6-7).

Through their naïveté and inappropriate behavior, George and Nell reveal the formulas of private theater, the “mechanisms, contrived structures that rely on shared generic conventions” (Bliss 6). Reflecting the carnivalesque “point of view of [one] who neither participates in nor understands” social conventions (Bakhtin, *Forms* 164), George and Nell are unaccustomed to this chronotope. As Venturewell and Humphrey discuss the plan for Luce’s marriage, Nell asks George, “dost thou think, in thy conscience now, ‘twill be / a match?” (2.1. 8-11) and then answers her own question, “I see ‘a has her, George, and I’m as glad / on’t” (2.1.38-39). As Lee Bliss comments, “Ignorant of comic patterns of experience or response, [Nell] finds a very predictable love story as mysterious as life” (8).

Through their actions, Nell and George reveal similarities between supposedly dissimilar classes. Although Beaumont’s two plots are parallel, their ideological dissonance makes this difficult to recognize. Because they love chivalric romance, the citizens should favor Luce and Jasper, who represent the cause of love (Bliss 15-16). Moreover, Nell and George should relate to their social resistance. Attempting to

save Luce from a marriage that would bar their love forever, Jasper remarks, "But to our own desires; you know the plot/ We both agreed on" (1.1. 57). To which Nell responds, "Yes, and will perform/ my part exactly (1.1. 58). Each pair, unsatisfied with its social "plot," manipulates the action. Yet, though each uses re-employment, they cannot relate because of class differences.

Rafe's plot likewise parallels Merrythought's. Similar in their humorous natures and abilities to move others, both also transcend social convention. Rafe begins his quest using the language of chivalric romance: "And certainly those knights are much to be com- / mended, who, neglecting their possessions, wander with a/ squire and a dwarf through the desserts" (1.3. 24-26). Renouncing his former life, Rafe resolves to pursue honor in a fantasy world. While Nell and George admire Rafe, they mock the equally quixotic Merrythought, whose wife complains: "If you would consider your state/ you would have little list to sing, iwis" (1.4.51-52). Merrythought naively replies, "It should never be considered while it were/ an estate, if I thought it would spoil my singing" (1.4.53-54). Like Rafe, he detaches himself from his ideologically prescribed social status, and repositions himself within a fictional chronotope. But George and Nell cannot relate when Merrythought rejects class expectations.

As Bakhtin explains, "The healthy 'natural' functions of human nature are fulfilled . . . only in ways that are contraband and savage, because the reigning ideology will not sanction them" (*Forms* 162). Yet, the respectable characters in *The London Merchant* are informed by the same motives and desires as the "grotesque" citizens. Dana Aspinall claims that Beaumont savagely mocks "George's and Nell's desires for unreal, unusual, and supernatural plots" in order to defend the "privatization of the stage" (172). But, as Merrythought's character demonstrates, the more "civilized" class exhibits the same barbaric qualities as George and Nell.

While Aspinall believes that Beaumont strictly distinguishes between classes, their exchanges call this claim into question. Rafe helps Mistress Merrythought find her money and speaks with Jasper. George and Nell engage with the actors on stage. Although the two stage worlds do not entirely merge, they share a collective humanity as they laugh and sing together: "Better music ne'er was known, / Than a choir of hearts in one . . . / Heigh ho, 'tis naught but mirth/ That keeps the body from the earth" (5.3.188-97). Both groups of characters are united by a laughter that, Bakhtin explains, "is universal . . . directed at all and everyone. . . . It asserts and denies, it buries and revives" (*Rabelais* 12). Mockery and mirth liberate human beings from their social stations.

Although united in heart and spirit, the characters remain divided by ideology. According to Lee Bliss, in "the end, satiric city comedy and romance come together . . . yet they also remain distinct" (55). The distinction speaks to the power of ideology. The two groups connect through song, only to be severed when the curtain falls. Althusser explains that ideology is incorporated in one's thoughts and behavior; it remains in our minds (696). Like Bakhtin's carnivalesque, though the play upends social order, it does so temporarily.

The divided ending of *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* does not reinforce the status quo but demonstrates its limitations. By revealing similarities in characters defined by contradictory ideologies, Beaumont stresses the artifice of social roles. These social constrictions may be debasing to the individual and to humanity as a whole.

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