Parroting the King: Royal Mockery and Parody in Ben Jonson’s Drama and Verse

Literary scholarship on Ben Jonson has recently taken two turns: Jonson is known on the one hand for writing political satires on broad subjects such as greed as well as on contemporary events such as the Gunpowder Plot or the arguments surrounding tobacco use in London. His satires at times pushed the limits of royal acceptability and on more than one occasion landed him in prison. On the other hand, Jonson wrote prolifically for King James I, producing a large number of his court masques, and had to appease the King to maintain his support. Leah Marcus argues in her study of Jonson’s masques that the playwright usually wrote in defense of the court’s policies surrounding mirth and pastime (of which his masques were certainly a part), and that when he wrote about the King, “Jonson confronted the king with himself, but in a way that challenged the monarch to become his own best self” (13). His writings at court supported and defended King James. Given that offending the King could have steep penalties, Jonson’s tendency to write in support of the monarch has led Bruce Boehrer to conclude of Jonson’s poetry that, “Assimilated into the social formation of Jacobean absolutism, Jonson’s moral discourse loses its practical capacity to bring about change” (1081). The fact that Jonson tended to mimic the King’s actions, language, and personality furthers the sense that Jonson was subsumed into absolute monarchy, doing what he could to be like and be liked by the King. Yet it is difficult to accept that Jonson gave up entirely his interest in writing political satire when he went to write for the King, especially given that the King was the source of major political decisions. Jonson’s interest in parodying his own contemporary events suggests that he would be especially attuned to the King’s actions, and as Marcus shows, he was, even to the point of imitating the King. As we shall see, however, Jonson’s imitations of King James did not always take a conciliatory turn, and they sometimes amounted to outright mockery. Jonson’s
relationship to King James did not supplant Jonson’s own authorial voice; instead the King’s
actions and writings gave Jonson useful fodder on multiple occasions for his own political
satires.

In *Politics of Mirth*, Leah Marcus performs perhaps the most extensive examination to
date of the relationship between Jonson and James. She provides compelling evidence for a
longstanding relationship between James and Jonson. She claims that, “it is tempting to assume
direct collaboration between the king and the poet” (11). This is because, “Jonson frequently
modeled his own activities upon significant achievements of the King, publishing his *Works* in
1616 to coincide with the publication of the *Works* of James I, going himself to Scotland in 1618
in imitation of the royal progress of 1617” (12). When writing about the King and even
criticizing him, Marcus claims that Jonson pits, “King James against himself, to muster his
laudable ideals in defeat of his less exalted practice – enacting the monarch’s victory over his
own misrule, a hard won triumph that demonstrates his capacity to work a similar transformation
upon the nation.”

Marcus’s characterization of the relationship between James and Jonson is informed by
her larger thesis surrounding the Stuart kings’ use of sport and festival. In contrast to Queen
Elizabeth, James publicly sanctioned sport and festival via *The Book of Sport*, which restored
allowance for Sunday and holiday pastime, and through documents such as *Basilikon Doron* (3).
Marcus identifies in James’s leniency not a penchant for liberty but a new way of promoting his
own authority: “By placing their official stamp of approval on the old pastimes, James and
Charles I attempted to extend royal power into an area of ambivalence and instability” (3). This
ambivalent space was that of holiday festivals, which allowed temporary freedom from authority
and often promoted celebrations of carnivalesque misrule. Sponsoring festival allowed James to
assert his authority even in moments of apparent liberation. By sanctioning actions that challenged his power, James developed “a form of social control that erased its own actions and its links to a central authority, a form of control that looked and felt like liberty” (8). Marcus applies her interpretation to the theatre, opposed by the same Puritan cross section that expressed its distaste for festival celebration. Playwrights were given enough artistic license to develop their own independent voices, but they ultimately wrote, “in defense of public mirth.” (8) Marcus argues that, “Freedom was tolerated so long as it could be contained – or at least could seem to be contained – within a framework upholding authority” (8-9).

*Politics of Mirth* presents a remarkably compelling argument for James’s use of sport as well as an extensive look at the relationship between James and Jonson. However, the analysis is necessarily limited by a variety of factors. Marcus focuses on Jonson’s writings between 1611 and 1617 when she finds that he wrote most strongly in “defense of public mirth” (9). As a result, *Politics of Mirth* does not examine the relationship between Jonson and James in the early days of James’ rule from 1603-1610. The study also limits itself to Jonson’s court masques and does not consider Jonson’s poems and dramas. The masque is a unique genre that may not be fully representative of Jonson’s style. Masques were performed directly for James, which would likely restrain Jonson’s willingness to satirize the King. Moreover, since the intended audience was the King and his court, an instructive or defense might have more impact than a satire. Jonson’s poems and early plays are of particular interest to our understanding of James’s authority, as well as his relationship to Jonson, because many of them feature frequent political satire. These works will be the subject of my discussion.

There is a strong satirical bent especially in Jonson’s earlier writing that complicates the notion that Jonson typically wrote in defense of authority. Jonson’s “Inviting a Friend to
Supper’s” use of food catalogues aligns it with a satirical tradition. Robert Cummings argues that the poem’s, “being overtaken by an accumulation of named foodstuffs, is unprecedented in English. At least it is unprecedented outside satirical fantasy” (104). Anne Brumley makes a similar note about the catalogues in Jonson’s “To Penshurst”: “In Jonson’s time, lists of food were most often found in satire” (226). In “The Play of Conspiracies in Volpone,” William Slights calls Jonson’s Volpone a comic satire about conspiracy. The formal structure of Volpone, a beast fable, as with the food catalogue, is highly satirical: Richard Dutton highlights M. Van Wyk Smith’s claim that, at the time of Volpone’s publication, “allegorical beast satires were almost all political satires” (73). We know that Jonson’s political satires were not always well received or so conciliatory to authority: his role in authoring Eastward Ho! landed him in prison for passages mocking King James’s Scottish accent, his attempts to unify Britain, and his policies about selling knights (Davis 37). Jonson was likely imprisoned in 1597 as well for contributing to a lost play, The Isle of the Dogs (Dutton 13).

If Jonson was not always so supportive of authority, James was not always so given to upholding liberty. In 1604, he placed all theatrical performance under his own parlay (Marcus 25). In 1603, he had done the same with fowl. His 1603 “Proclamation against unlawful Hunting” prohibits essentially all fowl hunting. He reasserts the need to enforce hunting laws again in 1610 in a speech to Parliament. Marcus argues that James’s control of the theatre meant that all masques and festival ultimately reflected his authority; critiques of the theatre were critiques of James (25). James’s declarations on hunting do seem to hint that he was in ultimate control of sport and festival – that, as Marcus argues, James desired absolute control – but in contrast to the theatre, there was no room for artistic license possible under his hunting ultimatum, nor did it make any of the usual attempts to “erase” and conceal James’s control as
masque and pastime so often did. Marcus overlooks James’s declarations against hunting, which confuse the degree to which James was willing to make allowances for the enjoyment of sport. Moreover, Jonson’s own responses to James’s declarations are highly satirical and do not always show the same conciliatory relationship to James that Marcus identifies in Jonson’s later masques.

While critics have identified a broad satirical pattern in Jonson’s writing, I argue that Jonson’s political satires are often directly targeted at King James. This will complicate somewhat our present understanding of Jonson’s relationship to King James, and it will also help explain a prominent satirical pattern appearing throughout Jonson’s writings that has been identified but not yet linked to James. In looking especially at James’s absolutism, and how this played into his regulation of festival, I will trace Jonson’s satirical responses to King James’s proclamations against fowl hunting and other similarly absolutist writings, treating in particular “Inviting a Friend to Supper” and Volpone.

Jonson’s Epigram 101, “Inviting a Friend to Supper,” offers a stylistic parody of James’s 1603 “Proclamation against unlawfull Hunting.” James’s proclamation includes numerous catalogues, a feature Jonson takes up in “Inviting a Friend to Supper” and which has tended to confound scholars. Cummings, for example, notes that, “the very fact that the poem seems to be constituted by the details of its menu – so matter-of-factly offered, so apparently uninterfered with – is an oddity” (104). Cummings connects the form to satirical fantasy, but it is at least equally likely that Jonson also had James’s proclamation in mind. An excerpt from the first sentence of James’s proclamation is worth reproducing simply to illustrate the extent to which James’s own writing is itself immediately overtaken by catalogues:
upon such as unlawfully hunt or enter into any Forest, Parke, Chase, or Warren, to kill or destroy any Deere or Game with any Dogs, Nets, Gunnes, Crossebowes, Stonebowes or other Instruments, Engines, or means whatsoever, or by any such unlawfull meanes or devises to spoile or destroy the Game of Pheasants, Partridges, Hearne, Mallard, & such like, And also divers other good Lawes and Statutes, provided for the preventing of the said offences, and therefore doe prohibite upon great paines and penalties aswel the having or keeping, as the using of any Deere hayes, Buckstalles, Dogs, Gunnes, Crossbowes, Nettes, and other Engines… (“A Proclamation against unlawfull Hunting,” 14-15, emphasis my own)

The first sentence of James’s proclamation slips into several catalogues as immediately as Jonson’s epigram. Catalogues figure repeatedly into both works, but one parallel concerning fowl is especially striking: James asks that nobody “spoile or destroy the Game of Pheasants, Partridges, Hearne, Mallard & such like” while Jonson lies to his friend that his feast will have, “patridge, pheasant, woodcock, of which some / May yet be there, and godwit, if we can; / Knat, rail and ruff, too” (15, 18-20). Curiously, Jonson’s narrator admits to lying about providing some of the very birds James prohibits (namely partridge and pheasant). Jonson’s positive reference to Tobacco in, “Tobacco, nectar, or the Thespain spring / Are all but Luther’s beer to this I sing” may also mark another subtle dig at King James, who had published in 1604 a pamphlet titled, “A Counterblaste to Tobacco” advising people against consuming tobacco due to its negative health effects (33-34). There is evidence that James’s writing and even his writing style was mimicked this closely in the poetic sphere. Lucas speculates that Jonson’s plain style may have derived from James’s penchant for plain language. She notes that James’s writings were a
“windfall for budding authors who wished to write in his defense” (10). Jonson’s poem suggests that they could also be used otherwise.

There is perhaps a deeper link between James’s proclamation and Jonson’s poem, however. Where Kirby and Kirby argue that James’s proclamation is, “so phrased that it seemed he claimed exclusively all the game in England,” Cummings observes that Jonson’s poem is a “summoning, as it were, of all the birds of Lincolnshire” (241, 111). Multiple scholars have recognized that a feast this extravagant appears only in records of royal meals. Cummings links Jonson’s feast to one Sir William Petre held for Queen Elizabeth for which he similarly imported birds from outside of London (108). Bruce Boehrer notes in “Renaissance Overeating: The Sad Case of Ben Jonson” that, “the inflationary tendencies of Jonson’s verse find an even fuller expression in the banquets of the Stuart nobility,” and himself relates the poem to a 1621 banquet thrown for the French ambassador containing, among other things, “12 pheasants in one dish, 24 partridges in another, 144 larks in a third,” and so on (1077). It is likely that, given the relationship to James’ proclamation and given the feast’s affiliation with royal extravagance, Jonson was deliberately satirizing James’s attempts to prohibit all hunting of fowl.

Boehrer has observed that the narrator’s vantage in “Inviting a Friend to Supper” is necessarily one of absolute and even divine authority. Boehrer highlights contradictions in the epigram that challenge the tradition of reading it as an achievement of the plain style: he notes the impossibility that Jonson can “sup free, but moderately” when “The Rabelaisian expansiveness of Jonson’s menu resists all notions of moderation” (1073). He claims that the “closing vision of simple liberty and innocent friendship is thus fulfilled through and constituted as a series of policing gestures” (1075). Each opportunity for freedom – be it indulgent eating or free discourse – is consistently opposed by attempts at restriction and moderation. Boehrer
concludes that this contradictory situation can only be achieved under conditions of absolutist
control: “Jonson himself can guarantee safety and good cheer only by occupying an absolutist
position within his poem […] Jonson is no simple drunkard; in a very real sense he is God, the
defied contradiction of the bourgeois subject. For if anyone can eat and drink without harmful
consequences, it is God” (1075). Of course, James also held, in a very real sense, absolute, divine
authority. In a 1610 speech, James argues that, “Kings are not only God’s lieutenants upon earth,
and sit upon God’s throne, but even by God himself they are called gods” (67). James declares
his divine and absolute power as early as 1604 in a speech to parliament (Sommerville 132). The
absolutism of the poem points, once again, to its status as a commentary on King James. It also
returns us to the consequences of James’s absolutist declarations. Jonson has chosen to parody in
epigram 101 James’s restrictions on all fowl hunting. The natural result is that, ultimately,
Jonson can only enjoy a banquet as rich as the King’s by appropriating James’s status as
absolute, divine ruler, which includes appropriating even James’s own linguistic style. Only
James can realize the feast the poem imagines. James is, the poem suggests, keeping the
resources of his kingdom to himself. In seeking a feast of infinite variety, James has left the rest
of his kingdom hungry. It is difficult to square Jonson’s numerous jabs at James’s absolutism
with Marcus’s thesis that Jonson tended to defend James’s use of mirth. Not only is Jonson
satirizing the King, but he is criticizing the King’s absolutism, not his willingness to allow
festival liberty.

Jonson incorporates fowl catalogues elsewhere in his writing, and they are virtually
always used satirically. Cummings notices that, “When Sir Epicure Mammon, in The Alchemist,
says that his footboy shall eat pheasants and knots and godwits, even he intends a hyperbole […]
Even these parodies of extravagance have something of the character of Jonson’s imaginary
meal” (107). He refers to, “more familiar mock menus as Volpone’s wooing Celia with ‘The heads of parrats, tongues of nightingales, / The braines of peacoks, and of estriches’” (104). Bird catalogues figure elsewhere in Volpone: Volpone calls for “Vulture, kite / Raven and gor-crow, all my birds of prey,” and for “my vulture, crow, / Raven.” (1.2.90-91, 5.2.264-5). Tellingly, Jonson’s satirical catalogues frequently center around fowl. Moreover, Jonson could have compiled satirical lists and mock menus from virtually any type of food; the fact that he repeatedly returns to fowl suggests that Jonson was not intending a general satire, which could have been accomplished with any food list. Jonson’s use of fowl catalogues suggest that he was possibly intending a more specific parody of James’s own written style.

In 1617, Jonson’s criticisms of excessive feasting in Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue drew the ire of King James. Marcus recounts how King James yelled out to the players midway through to stop the masque and dance (Marcus 120). Marcus admittedly stretches to reconcile this interruption with her thesis: “It is (barely) possible that James on this occasion was in complicity with Jonson, using the masque as an oblique vehicle for reforms he was too weak to enforce himself” (125). Her rationale for James’s anger is interesting: she claims that Jonson’s satirical references to excessive feasting were linked all too closely to James’s recent series of feasts, the expense of which had depleted his treasury (120-125). It is reasonable to question whether Jonson’s other poems addressing impossibly excessive feasts are of a similarly critical bent. “Inviting a Friend to Supper,” as Cummings notes, “celebrates only an imaginary excess,” while “To Penshurst” chronicles a hierarchical order that cannot possibly sustain itself; through “sheer rhetorical determination,” it postulates, as Boehrer puts it, that, “Penshurst could actually feed itself by Disney magic” (1078). And if James’s recognition that he was the butt of Jonson’s joke was, as Marcus claims, the source of his anger, it is difficult to accept that Jonson’s other
criticisms of “imaginary excess” were intended to be purely celebratory of James’s authority. It is also hard to believe that “To Penshurst” and “Inviting a Friend to Supper’s” 1616 publication in Jonson’s *Works* would have elicited a reaction from James significantly different from that of Jonson’s 1617 masque. If *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue* challenges Marcus’s thesis, then so, too, should “To Penshurst” and “Inviting a Friend to Supper.”

Finally, *Volpone* is worth some attention as another possible satire of King James. *Volpone* has traditionally been read as a satire, but Dutton notes that it is usually read as a general satire on greed. Some critics have focused on the play’s satirical relationship to the Gunpowder plot, which occurred the same year as the play’s performance (Dutton, Slights). However, it is possible that *Volpone* is also intended to parody King James. Volpone at one point disguises himself as “Scoto Mantuano,” “Scoto” suggesting a possible play on the Scottish King James (2.2). Volpone is treated early in the play to a masque (1.2). Gordon Campell points out that the dwarf, eunich, and hermaphrodite performing in the masque would not only have appealed to James’s “unhealthy predilection for people who had been unkindly treated by nature,” but further argues that, “these figures associate the court of Volpone with the court of James, and thus hint at the greed and corruption of the later” (Campbell xv). There is perhaps broader evidence that *Volpone* satirizes King James.

Jonson’s sources point to a larger satire on power and authority. Of those sources, I will look specifically at the beast fable because, as previously noted, it was virtually always used for political satire at the time of *Volpone’s* publication. Dutton acknowledges that the beast parable has surprisingly received very little scholarly attention (73). D.A. Sheve is the first to connect *Volpone’s* central beast allegory to Medieval fox lore, and he demonstrates that Jonson and his audience would have been familiar with such parables. The parables centers around a fox who
plays dead to lure in birds, which it then eats. Sheve relates the parables to Volpone’s plot to feign that he is dying in order to lure in Corbaccio, Corvino, and Voltore, on the promise of gaining Volpone’s inheritance only to turn on them and reveal that they have given up their “own fortunes” (Sheve 242-243). Volpone is the fox, playing dead to lure in the birds, Corbaccio, Corvino, and Voltore on false promises of riches only to later consume them. The consumption of birds in particular links Volpone to Jonson’s other satirical writings on King James’s restrictions on fowl hunting. The allegory also adheres well to Lucas’s conception of James’s power: by offering the illusion that he has recanted his own agency via festivals and misrule, much as Volpone gives up his agency in playing dead, James in fact manages to reassert his own authority as Volpone reanimates to consume those he has tricked. The possibility of subverting authority is ultimately illusory, and Volpone has orchestrated the entire plot much as James orchestrates potentially subversive festival misrule. This reading fits Lucas’s argument, but it is also highly seditious – in the process of asserting his authority, Volpone coerces Corbaccio into disinheriting his son and Corvino into prostituting his wife. If Jonson is in fact writing about James, he is certainly writing a biting satire.

Volpone advances the satire on the illusory nature of festival liberty seen in the beast fable through Volpone’s interactions with Celia, repeatedly described as a carnivalesque “feast.” Corvino tells his wife, Celia, as he takes her to Volpone’s house, that, “We are invited to a solemn feast / At old Volpone’s, where it shall appear / How far I’m free from jealousy or fear” (2.7.17-19). There is at least a vague similarity here to the ending of epigram 101: “No simple word / That shall be uttered at our mirthful board / Shall make us sad next morning, or affright / The liberty that we’ll enjoy tonight” (39-42). The feast is freeing; it will offer Corvino liberty from fear and sorrow just as Jonson’s own feast will for his guests. Volpone prefaces his attempt
to rape Celia by fantasizing over a meal: “we will eat such at a meal. / The heads of parrots, tongues of nightingales, / The brains of peacocks, and of ostriches / Shall be our food: and could we get the phoenix / Though nature lost her kind, she were our dish” (3.7.201-205). The bird catalogues are auspiciously reminiscent of epigram 101, and some of the diction is nearly identical. Volpone’s appeal to performing the classics is, again, similar to epigram 101: “Whilst we, in changed shapes, act Ovid’s tales, / Thou like Europa now, and I like Jove, / Then I like Mars, and thou like Erycine” (3.7.222-223). Not content to enact the past, Volpone also seeks to perform, “more modern forms, / Attired like some spirhtly dame of France, / Brave Tuscan lady, or proud Spanish beauty” which will, “so transfuse our wand’ring souls” (3.7.226, 234). His hopes for metempsychosis, like that in the masque of Act 1 Scene 2, suggest a fantasy in which Volpone and Celia can be all people, transcending all spatial and temporal borders. They will occupy an omniscient and absolute position like that which Boehrer identifies in epigram 101. My intent here is not to definitively pursue a parallel between Volpone and epigram 101 (although one may very well exist) but to highlight the way in which feasting is used in Volpone to signify the spurious potential for freedom offered in mirthful celebration. Volpone’s attempted rape of Celia, the ultimate infringement on her liberty, is described in terms of a private, short-lived feast; a festival celebration. I also intend to elaborate the possible satirical references to King James present in both.

The festival freedom and extravagance offered at Volpone’s “feast” functions rhetorically to persuade and entice Celia to perform (and, given Volpone’s plan to “act Ovid’s tales,” performance may have several intended resonances). Mirth’s coercive rhetorical function is manifested even more literally in Volpone’s curious use of a carpe diem song to persuade Celia further. The song form is tied to the pastoral, whose associations with country life distance it
from the court and connect it to holiday pastime and festival freedom. Robert Herrick’s carpe
diem poem, “Corinna’s Going a Maying,” for example, references Mayday festivities directly.
Moreover, because the carpe diem genre asks its subject to seize the day, it is tied to temporary
freedom from the constraints of day-to-day life; it is akin to festival freedom. Volpone’s song,
“Come, my Celia, let us prove,” closely imitates the Fifth Song of Catullus, but the opening lines
which make the song a carpe diem poem deviate from its source and are, as far as I can tell,
Jonson’s own invention: “Come, my Celia, let us prove, / While we can the sports of love; /
Time will not be ours forever, / He, at length, our good will sever” (3.7.167-9). Volpone is using
the rhetoric of mirth to coerce Celia into sleeping with him. “Sports of love” further connects the
poem to sport and pastime, while Volpone’s urging to make much of time connects the piece to
temporary escape from society. As in epigram 101, Volpone asks, in another of Jonson’s own
additions to the source material, “Cannot we delude the eyes / Of a few poor household-spies?”
(3.7.176-177) The spies are never too far away in Jonson’s works, and they indicate again that
Volpone’s hope for freedom is exceedingly temporary and exists amidst restraint very close to
home.

Volpone’s repeated unwanted advances toward Celia are consistently couched in
references to pastime and mirth. The coercion becomes, to Jonson, tantamount to rape. Jonson
provides a gross and transparent parody of festival liberty being used to coerce and compel
others. Marcus argues that James used mirth to assert his power; any offering of freedom was not
really freedom. Volpone’s use of mirth coercively to assert his own power is worth investigating.
Jonson has made a number of subtle references to James within the passage just described. The
bird catalogues may form yet another reference to James’s 1603 Proclamation. Volpone tells
Celia that, at the feast, “my dwarf shall dance, / My eunich sing, my fool make up the antic,”
which potentially positions the feast within James’s court (3.7.219-20). Volpone is interested in occupying a position of divine absolutism, like that of King James, as he seeks to perform the lives of figures from Ovid to the present. One might speculate that Jonson takes another knock at James when Volpone dresses up as “Scoto of Mantua” to pedal an elixir that lets customers live, “free from all disease” (2.2191). The all-purpose liquid offering immortality and freedom is of course a sham; the freedom offered is a mere illusion. Moreover, it is an illusion intended to coerce; Volpone hopes that, in selling the elixir, he may gain Celia’s attention. In dressing Volpone up as “Scoto,” Jonson may be parodying, again, the Scottish King James and his use of illusory offerings of freedom for his own devices. It comes as little surprise, moreover, that two of the four songs in Volpone appear in the elixir-pedaling scene. The pastoral song form becomes no more than a marketing trick for a sham product. Who better than to sing these songs, either, than Nano the dwarf, who would recall James’s court? If Jonson is indeed targeting James, then he is casting James’s use of festival as a rhetorical device with no substance beneath it but greed.

There may be more to the Scoto of Mantua parody, however, than is immediately apparent. The language of the scene remarkably mirrors that of King James’s own 1604 pamphlet, “A Counterblaste to Tobacco.” In it, James assumes the role of physician to eradicate the disease tobacco smoking has spread throughout England: “For remedie whereof, it is the Kings (as the proper Phisician of his Politicke-body) to purge it of all those diseases, by Medicines meeete for the same” (James 2). Volpone similarly plays doctor in order to pedal his oglio del Scoto – “oil of Scoto” – claiming to have attended the, “most learned College of Physicians; where I was authorized, upon notice taken of the admirable virtues of my medicaments” (2.2.134-5). Nano notes the elixir’s superiority to other drugs, stating, “No Indian drug had e’er been famed, / Tobacco, sassafras no named;” James spends a considerable portion
of his pamphlet discussing tobacco’s medicinal use among the American Indians: it, “was first found out by some of the barbarous Indians, to be a Preservative, or Antidot against the Pockes, a filthy disease” (Jonson 2.2.121-2, James 3). James argues against tobacco smoking using humoral theory, claiming that its “cold and wett facultie” will do nothing for the “coly and moyst braines,” and that it will fail elsewhere: “then if for preuenting the Cholieke you would take all kinde of windie meates and drinkes” (James 5). Volpone’s elixir will, on the other hand, “disperse all malignant humours that proceed either of hot, cold, moist or windy causes” (2.2.91-92). This is only possible if the elixir is a cure all; James attempts to refute the “Omnipotent power of Tobacco!” (James 7) James notes how tobacco, some say, “cures all maner of distellations, either in the head or stomacke (if you beleue their Axiomes),” then launches into a catalogue of its uses:

It helps all sorts of Agues. It makes a man sober that was drunke. It refreshes a weary man, and yet makes a man hungry. Being taken when they goe to bed, it makes one sleepe soundly, and yet being taken when a man is sleepie and drowsie, it will, as they say, awake his braine, and quicken his vnderstanding. (James 7).

In a highly similar passage, Volpone claims that his elixir can also cure head and stomach pain: “fortify the most ingest and crude stomach […] for the vertiginè in the head, putting but a drop into your nostrils” (2.2.95, 98). The mechanism for curing the head is not far from James’s discussion of tobacco’s mechanism: Volpone says to put a drop in the nostrils to cure the brain, while James says: “So this stinking smoake being sucked vp by the Nose, and imprisoned in the colde and moyst braines” (James 5). Volpone then launches, like James, into a catalogue, claiming his elixir will cure, “cramps, paralyses, epilepsies, tremor cordis, retired nerves, ill vapours of the spleen, stoppings of the liver, the stone, the strangury…” (2.2.101-102). Volpone
even alludes explicitly to listing, “countless catalogue of those I have cured,” if he had more time (2.2.130). It should not surprise us that Volpone’s frequent Latin phrases mirror James’s own repeated use of Latin in the pamphlet. Volpone’s mention of the price of his elixir – six hundred pounds – is not too far off, either, from Jame’s alarmed caution that people are, “bestowing three, some foure hundred pounds a yeere vpon this precious stinke” (James). Volpone may also take a dig at one of Jame’s favorite rhetorical moves – referring to various microcosms of his commonwealth. James opens by noting that,

> As euery humane body (deare Countrey men) how wholesome soever, be
> notwithstanding subiect, or at least naturally inclined to some sorts of diseases, or infirmities: so is there no Common-wealth, or Body-politicke, how well gouerned, or peaceable soeuer it bee, that lackes the owne popular errors (James 1)

Volpone leaves the stage muttering ridiculous claims about how, “nine thousand volumes were but as one page, that page as a line, that line as a word,” and eventually, “Why, the whole world were but as an empire, that empire as a province, that province as a bank, and that bank as a private purse” (2.3.217-8, 220-2).

Of course, there is also the broader parody of James as a quack doctor, appropriating the medical language of humoral theory and Latin without any real knowledge of it to sell the nation ironically on the very kind of cure-all he rejects. As Sandra Bell says in “The Subject of Smoke,” “James here ousts the usurping tobacco from its role as sovereign cure; the King, not tobacco, is the one to physic the country” (159). In arguing against tobacco, James seeks to offer a cure all for his nation just as Volpone seeks to pedal his own cure all. Jonson returns to criticizing royal absolutism in mocking James, “The most vehement and authoritative anti-tobacconist” (Bell 158). To Jonson, James’s cure all has no foundations; it is rhetoric without substance, just as in
controlling all hunting James has left the nation, Jonson thinks, feasts of words but no real food. James’s absolutist writings and actions leave the nation with no substance, and James seeks to withhold more and more, from fowl to tobacco, from his people. It would seem, too, that tobacco was otherwise infecting Jonson’s brain in 1605 when *Everyman in his Humour*, Jonson’s 1598 play that “satirizes tobacconists along with anti-tobacconists,” was resurrected and performed for James (Bell 158). Bell speculates that, “presumably the publication of James *Counterblaste* prompted the performance” (162). If the connection between *Volpone* and *A Counterblaste to Tobacco* is correct, this marks a second instance in which Jonson parodies James’s language directly.

The question now is why does Jonson make such a visceral attack on festival mirth and James himself in *Volpone*? In comparing mirth to rape, Jonson is certainly not writing, as Marcus aptly identifies in his other masques, “a defense of mirth.” Jonson is doing more, however, than parodying James’s use of festival to extend the reach of his authority; he is labeling James’s use of mirth as improperly coercive. Given that Jonson was imprisoned for his involvement in *Eastward Ho!*’s mocking of James the year prior to *Volpone*’s performance, it is natural that Jonson might be bitter about the uses and abuses of festival. He might be inclined to interpret festival freedom as a sham; since he was imprisoned for writing freely, the liberty James offered to playwrights was no liberty at all. The *Eastward Ho!* debacle may have convinced Jonson, however, that festival freedom was not only a lie, but it was coercive, and there were strict penalties for refusing to placate the authorities. There was little mutuality to the agreement – James was satisfied, but Jonson received little in return, and the penalties for offensive material were steep. Through Celia, Jonson is able to respond to and satirize the true nature, use, and abuse of festival liberty. As we shall see, there is additional historical evidence
that Celia’s treatment is tied directly to Jonson’s treatment throughout the *Eastward Ho!* affair.

Most historical criticism of *Volpone* has attempted to establish a compelling connection between the play and the Gunpowder plot, but the play’s performance in the year after Jonson’s imprisonment for contributing to *Eastward Ho!* creates the distinct possibility that Jonson was simultaneously responding to his imprisonment post-*Eastward Ho!* At least three articles note that *Volpone*’s composition may have been influenced by the fallout of *Eastward Ho!*, but I have found no studies that read *Volpone*’s plot in relation to the events of the *Eastward Ho!* affair (Clifford, Dutton, Tulip). Clifford goes the furthest in “Ben Jonson’s Beastly Comedy,” suggesting that the beast fable may be an attempt to write more ambiguous satire as, “the playwright retreated into the allegorical non-specificity of fables and classical allusions” (48). Perhaps we can probe this thread further still.

I have already addressed how Celia’s treatment in *Volpone* may be read as a gross parody of James’s use and misuse of festival liberty. There is additional evidence for a rather grisly link between Celia’s treatment in the play and Jonson’s treatment in the *Eastward Ho!* scandal. Celia’s husband vows to imprison her in Act II (2.5.57), but perhaps more remarkably, he threatens her with facial mutilation, the very punishment with which Jonson was threatened during his own time in the Tower of London. William Drummond remarks in his “Conversations With Ben Jonson,” the only extant source referencing *Eastward Ho!* directly: “The report was that they should then have their ears cut and noses” (Dutton 17, Drummond 129). In Act Three scene Seven of *Volpone*, Corvino tells Celia:

Be damned.

Heart, I will drag thee hence home by the hair;

Cry thee a strumpet through the streets; *rip up*
Thy mouth unto thine ears, and slit thy nose. (3.7.96-99, emphasis my own)

The parallels continue: Drummond’s letter also references the possibility that Jonson’s mother would poison him if he was convicted:

After their delivery he banqueted all his friends; there was Camden, Selden, and others; at the midst of the feast his old mother drank to him, and shew him a paper which she had (if the sentence had taken execution) to have mixed in the prison among his drink, which was full of lusty strong poison, and that she was no churl, she told, she minded first to have drunk of it herself (129).

Celia similarly asks on two occasions to be poisoned rather than be forced to sleep with Volpone. She tells Corvino: “Sir, kill me rather. I will take down poison” (3.7.95). She later tells Volpone: “Do me the grace to let me ‘scape. – If not, / Be bountiful, and kill me […] flay my face, / Or poison it with ointments for seducing / Your blood to this rebellion” (3.7.244-5, 3.7.252-54).

It is unlikely that the parallels between Celia’s treatment and Drummond’s letter are purely coincidental, especially given the close proximity between Jonson’s imprisonment and Volpone’s first performance. The reappearance of Drummond’s account in Volpone may help corroborate the facts of his letter, which have been questioned due to their tendency to deviate from Jonson and his collaborators’ ten letters to James and other authorities requesting their release from prison (Fossen 4-5). In any event, by directly relating Celia’s treatment to Jonson’s in the Eastward Ho! affair, Volpone extends the satire on James’s coercive use of mirth to a much more targeted satire focusing on Jonson’s own mistreatment. For one thing, it positions the satire within James’s own court. Parodies of mirth are tied to the theatre, a venue for festival celebration and performance. Jonson cynically reveals that offerings of freedom – be they through elixirs, feasts, or mirth – are in fact only rhetorical devices used to mask authority. If
playwriting can get one not only imprisoned but threatened with torture, there is no there there to the ostensible freedom James affords his playwrights. Jonson does not simply reflect on illusory freedom as a means for asserting power, however. He casts illusory festival freedom as coercion and rape. This is more than a simple reflection on the illusory use of mirth; Volpone’s attempted rape elevates the satire to a biting attack on authority as a coercive agent that has overstepped proper boundaries of behavior. By alluding directly to the *Eastward Ho!* affair, the criticism is consistently grounded not in a broad satire on greed or even in the Gunpowder Plot’s subversive transgressions, but in some very real actions of the Stuart monarchy itself. Moreover, it is unlikely that Jonson would have been simply unaware of the satire against Stuart authority he subtly constructed, especially following his recent imprisonment for satirizing the King, an event still very much on his mind.

Sir Politic Would-Be’s presence in *Volpone* is worth probing because it constitutes another part of the beast fable as well as another of Jonson’s potentially satirical uses of fowl imagery. It has been noted that Sir Pol, “has his niche in the common beast fable; he is Sir Pol, the chattering poll parrot, and his wife is a deadlier specimen of the same species” (Barish 83). He has, Barish identifies in “The Double Plot in *Volpone*,” “an obsession with plots, secrets of the state, and Machiavellian intrigue” (83). Dutton acknowledges that Sir Politic, “purports himself to be an agent in spying, ‘projects’, ‘cautions’ and other underworld operations” (57). In attempting an identification of Sir Pol, he refutes scholarship that has linked Sir Politic directly to Robert Cecil, a patron of King James who may have monitored and hyped up the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot, and instead provides evidence that Sir Politic may also parody Sir Henry Wotton, “British ambassador to Venice,” and Sir Anthony Sherley, who traveled to and spied in Venice. I shall attempt to offer yet another possible resonance for the character of Sir Politic.
By making Sir Politic not only a spy but also a parrot within *Volpone*'s beast fable, Jonson at least indirectly connects Sir Politic’s character to very real spies: Poley and Parrot. These are the same spies who appear in “Inviting a Friend to Supper,” when Jonson says, “And we will have no Poley or Parrot by” (36). As in *Volpone,* “Inviting a Friend to Supper,” positions the characters simultaneously as spies and fowl; Jonson excludes spies from his feast at the same time as he excludes the birds from his menu. Moreover, in both *Volpone* and “Inviting a Friend to Supper,” the parrots exist largely on the periphery, excluded from but tangential to the main festivities. Sir Politic resides outside of the main plot in his own subplot, while “Inviting a Friend to Supper” excludes Poley and Parrot from the feast, although in doing so acknowledges that they are always lurking at its margins. Moreover, each work attempts to contain the spies. Where “Inviting a Friend to Supper” vows to spy on the spies enough to prevent them from trespassing on the feast, Sir Politic is himself by the end of the play contained in a turtle costume and revealed to be a spy. Each work attempts to control the spies, but *Volpone* especially highlights Sir Politic’s ineptness.

Jonson’s interest in returning to Poley and Parrot may be vested in the real possibility that they were behind Jonson’s imprisonment under Queen Elizabeth’s reign. It has been noted that Poley and Parrot may have been responsible for Jonson’s imprisonment after the performance of *The Isle of the Dogs* (Eccles, Loweinstein, Riggs). Eccles first suggested the possibility in 1937, working largely from a letter from Drummond stating that the spies responsible for Jonson’s imprisonment were noted in an epigram, which he identifies as “Inviting a Friend to Supper” (Lowenstein 500).

Yet there may be a broader satire at play in Jonson’s repeated characterizations of spies as birds. Cummings recognizes that Jonson repeatedly returns to fowl imagery when describing
spies in his works: “Poley and Parrot are real people, but they have names apt for Jonson’s fertile way with bird metaphors: from the ‘lapwing spies’ in Poetaster to the parasites in Discoveries ‘that fly about the house all day…” (111). This suggests that Jonson perhaps had in mind a connection between Volpone and “Inviting a Friend to Supper.” It also furthers Jonson’s interest in using fowl imagery to parody King James. The birds as spies motif would continue to align fowl with James’s court. As Boehrer perceptively acknowledges, maintaining an absolute state requires a certain degree of espionage, and what image is better to turn to for symbolizing absolutism then fowl, which James tried so hard to absolutely control in his 1603 proclamation? The fact that Sir Politic is so heavily criticized as inept and impotent in Volpone, too, would suggest that Jonson was again aiming to satirize James’s own spies. Sir Pol is powerless; as Barish claims, “Sir Pol, like Volpone, is infatuated with his own ingenuity, and like Volpone he nurses his own get-rich-quick schemes; but none of these ever progresses beyond the talking stage” (84). His impotence is highlighted again when he is forced to hide in a turtle suit, told when to move, and even then revealed as fraudulent. Jonson’s play on Sir Politic can hardly be read as supporting absolutism, but as another biting if not highly comedic satire. This approach may help us reevaluate at least one of Sir Politic’s own statements. Dutton notices that Sir Politic, in speculating that Volpone’s elixir is “Some trick of state, believe it is” is, “wildly wrong in assuming that some political plotting lies behind it. Yet I suggest that he is also, in important ways, right… Volpone is pursuing the true ‘trick of state’, subverting Venice from within. His attempted seduction of Celia is a metonymy for his seduction of the whole state” (67). While this is a fairly strong leap on Dutton’s part, we can certainly find some dramatic irony in Sir Politic’s identification of “political plotting” in the elixir. If, as I have pursued previously, Jonson uses Volpone to parody the rhetorical “tricks of state” that James employs to
coerce own subjects, the elixir is certainly one of them. We can read this moment not necessarily as a parody of the Gunpowder Plot, but as yet another dig at the mirthful tricks that authorize King James’s authority. And in some senses, Celia does come to represent the seduction of the state, but she can just as easily represent James’s seduction of his court as the seduction of a subversive outsider.

It is now worth addressing an issue that has recently emerged regarding Jonson’s authorial agency. Marcus’s landmark study of Jonson’s masques claims that Jonson wrote continually in “defense of mirth.” Within her reading, even his satires were ultimately intended as instructive: “In his masques at court and in at least a few of his plays, Jonson confronted the king with himself, but in a way that challenges the monarch to become his own best self” (Marcus 13). Because his writings are sanctioned by the king, Jonson loses a degree of satirical agency and, as with other aspects of mirth and festival, his plays must ultimately work to support the established authority. Boehrer applies a similar reading to Jonson’s poetry, claiming that, “Assimilated into the social formation of Jacobean absolutism, Jonson’s moral discourse loses its practical capacity to bring about change” (1081). He finds in poems such as “Inviting a Friend to Supper” and to “Penshurst,” that, “discourse of moderation – assertions of stoic calm, gestures toward classical restraint and the plain style, the pretense of cheerful humility – repeatedly melts into the language of royal absolutism and royal display… Jonson’s success in asserting the validity of this ‘prior order’ depends very largely on his rendering it acceptable to the ‘existing hierarchical system’. Without such acceptance, Jonson is at best doomed in his lifetime to genteel literary obscurity…” (1080) These analyses necessarily suppose from the outset that if Jonson was writing about absolute authority, then he was writing in support of it. When “Inviting a Friend to Supper” asserts absolutism as the “embodiment and origin of the golden mean,” it is
doing so in a way that will placate rather than question authority. For even as Boehrer calls
Jonson’s “renaming display restraint and vice versa” revolutionary, he concedes that Jonson’s
“revolutionary tendencies are compromised from the outset” by his need to appeal to Stuart
authority (1081). If Jonson’s writings do challenge authority, Jonson is unaware of the challenge,
and led to it by a greater need to authorize King James’s rule.

I have attempted to show that Jonson is acutely aware of his attempts to challenge
authority, if simply through his deliberate attempts to parody James’s “Proclamation against
unlawfull Hunting” and “A counterblaste to tobacco” in ways that mock rather than placate his
authority. Boehrer makes a compelling case for absolutism becoming the force behind moderate
restraint in “Inviting a Friend to Supper,” but we must remember similar instances such as those
in Volpone where Volpone likewise conjures grand feasts, authoritarian surveillance over spies,
and the omniscient performance of classical and modern characters not to support authority but
to persuade Celia to sleep with him against her refusal. It can hardly be said that this similar
instance in any way supports or keeps up authority; Jonson is unquestionably lodging a
deliberate criticism of the coercive nature of authority, and he is most likely lodging it at King
James himself. Volpone should invite us to reread “Inviting a Friend to Supper” and similar
poems as more satirical, a point already urged from the parodies embedded in the poems’ own
language. We must remember, too, that Jonson has linked his own unfair treatment under
authority to Celia through numerous allusions to the Eastward Ho! affair, and that Celia’s
continued refusal to give in to Volpone’s authority and perform his coercive decrees should tell
us that Jonson himself would rather not give up his own agency to conform to the dictates of
authority. And the fact that Celia’s relentless determination pays off at the end when Volpone’s
crimes are revealed suggests that, at least within the lines of the play, resisting authority’s
coercion – be it threats of lost patronage or threats of imprisonment and torture – will ultimately pay off. To Jonson, absolutist authority is ultimately rhetoric without substance – James’s banquets are emptying his kingdom, his medicinal cures are a sham, and his offerings of mirthful freedom are in fact coercive forms of restraint. And as Jonson suggests in *Volpone*, eventually all would be revealed as James’s extravagant spending depleted his coffers.

If James’s authority is rooted in insubstantial rhetoric, what better way to challenge it than through language? Jonson’s plays and poems indicate neither that Jonson gave up his agency to write under authority nor that Jonson was unaware of the satirical nature of his works. Instead Jonson’s writings subtly but closely mock King James’s uses of mirth and absolute authority. Language becomes for Jonson a medium of dissent and resistance. As Jonson writes in his epistle to *Volpone*:

I shall raise the despised head of poetry again, and stripping her out of those rotten and base rags wherewith the times had adulterated her form, restore her to her primitive habit, feature and majesty, and render her worthy to be embraced and kissed of all the great and master-spirits of our world. As for the vile and slothful, who never affected an act worthy of celebration, or are so inward with their own vicious natures as they worthily fear her, and think it a high point of policy to keep her in contempt with their declamatory and windy invectives: she shall out of just rage incite her servants (who are *genus irritabile*) to spout ink in their faces that shall eat farther than their marrow, into their fames; and not Cinnamus the barber with his art shall be able to take out the brands, but they shall live and be read till the wretches die, as things worst deserving of themselves in chief, and then of all mankind. (Epistle 5-6)

Recalling his own branding during his imprisonment for *The Isle of the Dogs* and, as Dutton has
perceptively noted, perhaps the threats of facial mutilation he faced during the *Eastward Ho!*
affair, Jonson vows to attack his opponents by tossing ink in their faces (31). As Celia escapes
her imprisonment from Volpone’s coercion through patient resistance, Jonson will break free
from the walls of his prison through the force of his verse. Or as Dutton says, “he turns a graphic
image of the state’s authority over his body into a metaphor for his own authoritative powers as a
writer” (25). He will, “raise the despised head of poetry again,” and through her Jonson will
resist with ink the physical brands that threaten him. Moreover, Jonson vows through his lines to
free himself from the threats that surround him and try to intimidate him into submission. It is
through poetry that Jonson finds his own agency and his own voice to break free from the prison
of absolutist control and poetic censure that threatens to engulf him. It is through poetry that
Jonson, like Celia, will resist those who threaten to coerce him, through which Jonson will find
the power to address authority face to face, and through which Jonson will escape the prison cell
that would entrap him not if he silenced his voice, but if he gave his voice up to appease those in
authority.
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