

A FAILED PERFORMANCE IN SELF-FASHIONING: AN INTERPRETATION OF
FRANCIS BEAUMONT'S THE KNIGHT OF THE BURNING PESTLE

by

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Francis Beaumont's The Knight of the Burning Pestle¹ is a comic play in which a middle class couple interpose themselves into the action of the play they have come to watch--The London Merchant--upsetting the intended action of that play. The couple call for and pay for the interjection of their servant Rafe into the play in the role of knight errant, and what follows is a humorous comedy of chivalry and confusion. At once, the efforts of George and Nell, the merchant husband and wife, to present themselves as credible members of a social élite² are obviously absurd. Yet a closer inspection of these absurd efforts at posturing yields a deeper historical and sociological significance than has been accorded this play previously, a significance uncovered by application of the works of Stephen Greenblatt and Erving Goffman. The actions of George and Nell can be seen to constitute a mismanagement of the pervasive and powerful concept of self-fashioning which was enjoying resurgence and reshaping in Renaissance times, according to Greenblatt's Renaissance Self-Fashioning From More to Shakespeare. Furthermore, application of tenets from Goffman's Presentation of Self in Everyday Life to the merchants' actions reveals that the behavioural strategies of self-presentation universal to mankind are comically exaggerated and skewed when dramatically employed by George and Nell.

The idea that George and Nell offer a laughable presentation is not a new one; however, by taking the theories of Greenblatt and Goffman and looking at this couple specifically in terms of two self-fashioners who make a dramatic request for upward social mobility, the possibility arises that the play has relevance to seventeenth century historical issues. This relevance may explain the failure of the play at its first performance. Initially, Greenblatt and Goffman serve to endorse the critical

consensus that in the play Beaumont intended to satirize middle class aspiration and social vulgarity, an intent which should have ensured the popularity of the play with those aristocratic members of the audience who first watched it. But the play failed. Perhaps, in spite of its ludicrous aspects, the ambition of the merchant was received by the audience in a defensive way. Perhaps, too, the aristocratic posture of the couple, albeit a ridiculous emulation, alerted the audience to the infiltration of base born, new-wealth men into the social ranks of the élite. And perhaps George's ostentatious display of wealth, in the face of the growing financial plight of the upper classes, created anxiety in the audience. These conjectures point to the idea that the aristocratic members of the audience of The Knight would not have appreciated a reminder of the historical fact of the erosion of their social and political status: Lawrence Stone, in his The Crisis of the Aristocracy: 1558-1641, has demonstrated that the power base of the English aristocracy was, in the early years of the seventeenth century undergoing a general weakening, a major cause of which was economic. If Beaumont's satire was first produced for an audience made up of this threatened upper class, it may not be surprising that it found unamusing the efforts of a wealthy grocer to imitate their manners, no matter how ridiculous the attempt.

I

That the play was performed before an audience with largely upper class tastes and interests is important to the argument that such an audience could have felt threatened by the actions of George and Nell. Yet, there has long been dispute as to date and venue of the first

performance of The Knight--much as there has been regarding authorship of the play. However, it is now generally accepted that Francis Beaumont wrote the play with little or no help from his usual collaborator, John Fletcher.³ It is also generally accepted that the first performance was conducted sometime between 1607 and 1608, by a group of boy actors, the Children of the Queen's Revels, at Blackfriars, a private theatre. Although some critics have felt for a time that the play was first performed in 1611, and therefore at Whitefriars (Doebler xii, Gayley 316, 318), recent consensus points to an earlier first production at Blackfriars, a conclusion based on substantial internal and external evidence compiled by Charles Mills Gayley. For instance, an allusion in the Induction to the seven years of plays at the playhouse pinpoints Blackfriars, the only theatre which presented plays continuously between 1603 and 1611, when the manuscript fell into the publisher's hands. The numerous references in the play to boys and children indicate that the play was performed by a group of boy actors, and there was only one which was engaged at Blackfriars between 1603 and 1611--the Children of the Queen's Revels. Furthermore, the manuscript of the play is known to have been held by Robert Keyser, manager of the Children at Blackfriars between 1600 and 1608. The date of 1608 is further significant since the Children of the Queen's Revels ceased to act at this theatre after April 1st, which reinforces the probability that the play was performed before that date. Gayley has also ascertained that other textual references and allusions centre around the years 1607-08; for instance, there is reference to the King of Moldavia, who visited London in 1607, and none of the romances ridiculed in The Knight is of a later date than 1607 (318). Thus, there can be little doubt as to where and when the play was first performed.⁴

Just as confirmation that the play was performed at Blackfriars is important to the argument that George is presenting himself before a socially specific audience, so will a brief survey of critical opinion of the play, and a review of Jacobean audience behaviour, give strength to the argument that George is deliberately performing for the audience of The London Merchant in order to impress them.

Typical of critical opinion about the play is Rabkin's view that The Knight is a comic "exploration of the nature of theatrical illusion" (511), and, also, according to Doebler, a burlesque of such popular seventeenth century literary styles as the Spanish chivalric romance and middle class plays of the Dekker-Heywood mode (xiv). Critical opinion also acknowledges the play's caricature of citizen auditors (Harbage, Traditions 106), and Beaumont's exceptionally mild, and therefore paradoxical, treatment of George and Nell. Harbage suggests that Beaumont's attitude to the middle class merchant couple has its basis in truth and sympathy, in a willingness both to reveal the ignorance of the couple and to rescue them from absolute mockery by an audience (Traditions 107). Andrew Gurr concurs with Harbage that the playwright grounded his parody in truth:

Their favourite kinds of play, their hearty naivete,
and their comically complacent insensitivity to their
own ignorance are laid bare so that the play can deny
everything they stand for, the whole satire accomplished
with no more malice than is needed for a bawdy innuendo
to pass current without its victim noticing. (6)

And yet this gentle satire failed at its first performance, a failure for which various reasons have been conjectured. Several critics, including

Harbage and Doebler, attribute the initial commercial failure to the playwright's "truth and sympathy," that is, his decision not to endow the parody with much animosity toward the presumptuous grocer (Harbage, Traditions 107). Such explanations cite for support Beaumont's address to the reader, where he states that he did not intend to "wrong anyone in this comedy" (Bowers 8). Doebler suggests another reason for the play's failure; it is possible that the ironies in the play were too refined even for a coterie audience. For support he alludes to Burre's remark in the epistle dedicatory about "the wide world . . . not understanding the privy mark of irony about it" (Doebler xiii). Whereas the play may have failed in part on both counts, further exploration of the attendant historical, sociological issues will reveal deeper anxieties in the audience than perhaps Harbage and Doebler have acknowledged.

Despite differences of opinion regarding the reason for the play's failure, the critics do concur on two important issues, namely the satiric intent of the play and its three part structure. The drama exhibits an overtone of satiric judgment pronounced upon middle class men and women as seen in Nell and Goerge:

Their smugness, their self-seeking, their complacency,
 their overprudence, their social climbing, their vainglory
 and often their inadvertent social charm (Doebler xiv)

invite the audience to laugh at the merchant couple for interpreting events in the drama literally. It is difficult to separate the action of the play from the reactions of the couple; George and Nell become part of the "frame for the action" (Doebler xvii). Critics also acknowledge that the play has a three part structure: the intended play, The London Merchant, is a satirical inversion of the prodigal son theme, notes Andrew

Gurr, which is interrupted by the episodic burlesque exploits of Rafe; added to these two "plots" is a third dramatic presentation--the comments of the couple interspersed throughout the action (4).

My reading of The Knight accepts the satiric intent and the three part structure, and it accepts the beliefs of Harbage and Shapiro that upper class patrons, as well as middle class patrons,⁵ frequented Blackfriars' plays. This information strengthens my idea that George is "performing" for members of that class to which he aspires. Harbage quotes from Marston who referred to playgoers at Blackfriars as "Select, and most respected Auditours," and as a "gentle" audience (Audience 88). Probably the higher rates a private theatre charged, and the fact that such theatres were subject to city regulations (Harbage, Traditions 80), distinguished the Blackfriars enough from its rival, the public theatre, that a more refined clientele was attracted to patronize it. Another lure for an upper class theatre goer was the courtly atmosphere of the occasion. Harbage points out that many of the plays performed at the theatre had a courtly flavour. Indeed, the Children of the Queen's Revels were well acquainted with performing dramatic extravaganzas for courtly occasions. Naturally, then, a man of wealth but little social power would be drawn to such entertainment where he could associate with persons of a higher social status he aspired to. *is that the omnipotence of the elite was*
 Shapiro gives a more specific breakdown of audience composition than Harbage. He goes so far as to suggest that the private theatre audience was composed of

. . . actual, potential, or self-styled figures of power and responsibility who wanted and could afford vicarious participation in a courtly occasion. (68)

The audience would also include available gentry, students at the inns of court, and those aristocrats who wished to present themselves in society. Shapiro further suggests that attendance at private theatres as well as at courtly occasions would offer an opportunity for the upper class person to make a public gesture of power and reputation. He offers this conjecture in the light of Stone's comments on the decline of the aristocracy and the subsequent predicament of the upper classes whose social and political power eroded as their wealth decreased (68). Perhaps by appearing at plays and offering a public reminder of their status, the titled were trying to preserve the appearance of a position of absolute power.

While several of the critics mention that George is a caricature of the middle class theatre patron, few delve into the sociological implications. I concur that the citizen auditor is caricatured, but my reading of the play suggests that George, and indeed the play, has a greater sociological significance.

To prove this sociological significance requires outlining the historical context which can be seen to determine the socio-political expectations of the audience. George cannot be perceived as a threat by any member of the audience unless his actions signify some kind of power challenging that of the audience. Stone's examination of that period's socio-political climate reveals that the omnipotence of the *élite* was being challenged and that the reason lay in the changing distribution of wealth (13-30).

II

Up until the late 16th century the nobility and the aristocracy lived a privileged life founded on landed wealth and heredity. Such families were surrounded by obedient servants and lower gentry, their power ensured by a system of hierarchical subservience from poor to rich, from the peon to the titled. By the early 17th century this attitude of respectful subservience was breaking down--a general weakening of the hierarchical framework was in effect. Several forces combined to undermine the power of the upper classes and to allow the possibility of men of new wealth infiltrating the upper ranks: prices rose to a degree unparalleled in preceding centuries; there was a rising trend in conspicuous consumption by the nobility; credit facilities changed so that forfeiture for non-payment was strictly enforced; the hereditary élite permanently alienated much of its capital resources in land (therefore its political influence was also unstable); the merchant bourgeoisie was accumulating unprecedented fortunes in trade (it was also becoming educated to political and administrative departments of government previously reserved for the nobility and the aristocracy) (Stone 13). The temporary outcome of these economic changes was the financial instability of some members of the upper classes, and a corresponding rise in middle class wealth and aspiration to title. Stone does not say that the middle class request for title and prestige was immediately granted--the social distance between a trader, even a wealthy one, and a member of the lesser gentry, for example, could not easily be legally bridged by title or coat of arms. Theoretically, status was only possible for those born into the ranks of the gentry, the nobility, or the aristocracy. Of course, there were nefarious ways to

acquire a coat of arms or a title; for instance, bogus heralds exacted huge sums from gullible men in return for tokens of increased social status (Stone 66). But fortunately for the merchant, there was also a legal though inconvenient way to be absorbed into the ranks of the landed gentry. The framework of English society during the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras was remarkably flexible, though it appeared on the surface to be rigid: the upper classes were willing to accept merchant wealth at a generation's remove, and disguise its lowly origins with a title.

It has been the readiness of the landed classes to accept on equal terms wealth from any source at one generation's remove which has given the English social framework its remarkable stability, despite the huge turnover of pedigreed families and the growing volume of new wealth from non-landed sources. (Stone 53)

There was too much middle class wealth and there were too many families with aspirations of social status for the upper ranks to turn a blind eye. Ultimately,

despite the massive tide of wealth flowing into the hands of yeomen, lawyers, city merchants, top-ranking administrators, and successful politicians, they were all successfully absorbed, at different levels, into the ranks of the landed gentry. (Stone 39)

It would not be easy for a merchant like George, quite possibly a recipient of this new wealth, to acquire the kind of social status he might have wished for, but there was enough of an incentive to induce a middle class citizen to try.

Given the merchant's motivation to seek social status, it remains to consider how he will present himself as eligible for transfer. Greenblatt's descriptive apparatus is helpful in exposing George as an enterprising self-dramatist, one who seeks to improve his image before a specific audience. This model also provides a context for George's attempt to rewrite his identity; it illuminates the growing predisposition of man to shape his destiny independently of God in the Renaissance, and also, by extension, the possibility that man may dare to rewrite the rules of the social framework, an activity which George can be seen to engage in.

III

Greenblatt introduces his theory that self-fashioning was a tremendous influence on Renaissance thinking by tracing its origins. After Greenblatt outlines the historical development of a Christian mode of self-fashioning, by which the individual forms himself after the pattern of Christ, he proceeds to introduce the generalization that "this principle of adaptation is obviously not limited to the propagation of the gospel." Thus he can introduce his theory of secular self-fashioning. He offers Taverner's imperative from his Garden of Wisdom (1539) as an instance of the many counsels promoting secular self-fashioning: whoever desires to be conversant with public affairs, "must . . . fashion himself to the manners of men." Shapiro's observation, that there are numerous literary instances of men who "urge their aristocratic readers to exploit the effects of their behavior on others" (69), for example the works of Castiglione and Machiavelli, supports Greenblatt's point.

Self-fashioning in a secular context acquires new meaning, suggests Greenblatt. It is now linked with manners and bearing, particularly of the upper classes; it can indicate adherence to ceremony; but perhaps more importantly, in consideration of George the merchant, "it suggests representation of one's nature or intention in speech or actions" (3). So far, Greenblatt is concerned with cultivation of identity in Renaissance life. But what makes his argument most appealing is that "self-fashioning derives its interest precisely from the fact that it functions without regard for a sharp distinction between literature and social life" (3). My reading shows George's performance bridging literature and social life. In his effort to realize an identity which will fit him for elevated status, George temporarily appropriates for himself the literary mode of drama and the role of actor, adapting each to his own needs and personality. By assuming a part in the play before him, he actually becomes a literary figure, though briefly (of course, he is also a literary figure by virtue of being one of Beaumont's characters), in order to justify his own life. Momentarily, his life becomes a part of literature, and self-fashioning can be said to have crossed "the boundaries between the creation of literary characters, the shaping of one's own identity, the experience of being molded by forces outside one's control, the attempt to fashion other selves" (3).

Greenblatt's introductory list of "governing conditions common to most instances of self-fashioning" (8), though specific to particular Renaissance literary figures, is useful in showing that George is deliberately attempting to fashion a new social identity for himself. In particular, five of Greenblatt's generalizations can be used in conjunction with his central premise that the Renaissance cultivated a

sensitivity for the idea that selves could be fashioned.

1. [No potential self-fashioner] inherits a title, an ancient family tradition or hierarchical status that might have rooted personal identity in the identity of a clan or caste . . . all are middle-class.
2. Self-fashioning . . . involves submission to an absolute power or authority situated at least partially outside the self--God, a sacred book, an institution such as church, court, colonial or military administration.
3. Self-fashioning is achieved in relation to something perceived as alien, strange or hostile. This threatening other--heretic, savage, witch, adulteress, traitor, antichrist--must be discovered or invented in order to be attacked and destroyed.
9. Self-fashioning, is always, though not exclusively, in language.
10. The power generated to attack the alien in the name of the authority is produced in excess and threatens the authority it sets out to defend. Hence self-fashioning always involves some experience of threat, some effacement or undermining, some loss of self.

Five specific actions by George and Nell recommend them as self-fashioners, as two people seeking respectability for their material wealth in the form of some as yet undefined social status. George directs a significant share of the play's action and is allowed to do so by an audience which does not respond to the pleas of the actors to halt George's designs; hence he is seen to exercise power. He displays his wealth at every opportunity, signifying by implication that he has enough money to buy social power if necessary. George aligns himself with those values imputed to Humphrey, Luce's gentleman suitor, which the upper

class members of the audience would attach importance to, for example, honour and obedience to authority. He and his wife denounce any action which they feel would be scorned by the audience, for instance, disregard of parental authority and social convention, practiced by Jasper and Merrythought. But the most important investment George and Nell make to project themselves as worthy of social climbing is to interject their servant into the play, characterized as a heroic knight, with the intent of eliciting the endorsement of the audience. The couple use Rafe in two ways to show their affiliation with the upper classes: they direct and applaud all his noble actions, and they use him as an instrument to effect a conversation of sorts with the gentlemen in the audience. Yet the identity the couple would create is undermined by their middle-class-ness which comes through clearly.

As directors of the play's action, George and Nell commandeer the theatre for the duration of the performance and present their servant as a knight errant who performs deeds of valor and bravery to the credit of all grocers. Eager to show their prowess as directors, the couple capriciously insert Rafe into the action at every opportunity. He appears in the prologue, he appears strategically throughout the play, and he appears in the final scene, where his death speech is the climax, or rather, the anti-climax, of the whole production. George and Nell draft exploits for Rafe to perform which are bold, spectacular and full of action, with the result that the plot and characters of The London Merchant are at times overshadowed by the episodic adventures of the couple's servant. The plot constructed by the couple gains in dramatic intensity toward the end of the play as George and Nell intervene more often with proposals for Rafe to perform dramatic deeds of loyalty and honour. They compel Rafe to

fight the ingrate, Jasper, against the better judgment of the actors to whom George declares "Plot mee no plots, I'le ha Raph come out, I'le make your house too hot for you else" (II line 260). They interrupt Mistress Merrythought's speech so that Rafe can fight the giant Barberosa. They urge Rafe to woo the king of Cracovia's daughter. They direct him to recite a May-day speech, much to the chagrin of the boy actors. And, finally, they legislate a death speech for Rafe, for no apparent reason other than to have a fitting end to his part. In addition to adding Rafe's part, Nell and George pepper the production with frequent asides and interruptions; they comment on popular contemporary plays and on the physical make-up of the actors; and they dictate the entertainment between acts--all of which suggests a large measure of power derived directly from their wealth which enables the couple to assume the authority, for the duration of the play, to override the pleas of the actors and direct a significant share of the performance. The actors, ordered to change their schedule by an upstart grocer, must have felt a keen sense of frustration since the gentleman audience, whom they were supposed to please, refused to verbally denounce the grocer.

The lack of response on the part of the gentleman auditors, indicating contemptuous silence (Shapiro 70), suggests that George's power is financial, for he does not distinguish himself as politically or socially powerful, nor does he prove himself a literate theatre critic. In keeping with Greenblatt's provisions, the merchant George is middle class and therefore has no upper class social status to boast. But he does have money and this he freely distributes; thus, he can pay for his dramatic revisions. At the beginning of the first act he forwards two shillings to the Speaker of the Prologue so that Rafe's part may be attended by shawms

(Prologue.100.) He mentions that he will be in charge of the music, to the irritation of the Speaker of the Prologue. And George expects value for his money, as his later chastizement of the Speaker suggests

I gave the whoreson gallowes money, and I thinke hee
has not got mee the waits of Southe-warke. (II.518)

George spends money freely but, aware as he is of its origin in hard work, he has a sharp eye as to its final destination. Two instances in the play reveal the merchant's sensitivity to the value and power of money. In the first instance, Rafe, who has spent a night at a tavern, deems it unnecessary to pay for his board; instead, he feels adequate recompense to his host is mere thanks, since, after all, he, Rafe, is a knight. The tapster, unlike Rafe, is not quixotic and he wants his twelve shillings. When Rafe ignores him and trouble is imminent, George steps in flourishing the necessary twelve shillings. In the second instance, George gives Rafe at least four shillings and five pence with which to pay for his lodging in Cracovia. He urges Rafe "be not beholding to [the king]" (IV.102). The merchant insists that the knight-pretender not be seen to be dependent on the king's generosity; at stake is an issue of power which may have reverberations in the relationship between George the merchant and the gentleman auditors. George is probably flourishing his money both as a measure of the power he already possesses and as a reminder to the audience that he recognizes money as a necessary coefficient of increased social status.

His allegiance to Humphrey can also be interpreted as a gesture with which he recommends himself to the gentlemen in the audience. It is one of Greenblatt's conditions that a self-fashioner submit "to an absolute power or authority situated at least partially outside the self." I

suggest that the absolute power George submits to is the power of social status reflected in Humphrey and enjoyed by upper class members of the audience. Furthermore, I see a connection between Humphrey's background and Rafe's which leads me to conclude that George and Nell put Rafe forward as a member of a social class higher than their own. The connection points to Rafe's role as an instance of self-fashioning designed to reflect back on the couple. As the merchant and his wife fashion a knight from a tradesman, so would they fashion for themselves a more prestigious social identity. Humphrey's declaration "I am of gentle blood and gentle seeme" (I.81) ("gentle" can be interpreted as genteel or as well-born), coupled with his elegant turn of phrase, seems to be credential enough to endear him to George and Nell. Indeed, Nell feels that her husband should model himself after Humphrey:

There's a kind Gentleman, I warrant you, when will you do
as much for me George? (I.127)

And after Humphrey's expostulations of love to Luce, during which time he dwells on the quality and price of his gift to her of white gloves, Nell is completely taken with him.

. . . it is e'ne the kindest yong man that ever trod on
shooe leather. (I.197)

And of course they support his intended alliance with Luce unconditionally. Humphrey seems to fit the couple's idea of a gentleman: Venturewell mentions that he is wealthy and Nell says he is "fair-spoken"; these qualifications added to his seeming gentle origins must make him appealing, for in all other respects Humphrey is a coward and a buffoon. Curiously, George and Nell seem to respect Humphrey not so much for having social status as for appearing to. All their praises of him allude to his

eloquent manner and appearance, yet he is a character of dubious background. We are told that he is wealthy, but nowhere in the text is it given that he is a member of the landed gentry; the audience is left to infer this fact from Humphrey and from Venturewell's acknowledgment that Humphrey is of good blood. What seems to be more important is that Humphrey can be treated as a gentleman, and thus social status is implied. Stone argues that during this period the title of gentleman was adopted by almost anyone. The title once reserved for members of the landed gentry was in effect devalued, as Sir John Doderidge pointed out in 1652.

In these days he is a gentleman who is commonly taken and reputed. And whosoever studieth in the universities, who professeth the liberal sciences and to be short who can live idly and without manual labour and will beare the port charge and countenance of a gentleman, he shall be called master And if need be, a King of Heralds shall give him for money armes newly made and invented with the crest and all; the title whereof shall pretend to have bin found by the said Herauld in the perusing and viewing of old registers. (Stone 49)

This is not to say that Humphrey belongs in this category, but the ambiguity of his status and the rising trend in self-made gentlemen would surely attract Nell and George, who advance their servant to the status of knight and stand behind all his actions.

The couple show their loyalty to Venturewell, a middle class merchant, primarily in their support of Humphrey and by their anger at Jasper. Venturewell is doing through marriage what the merchant couple attempt to

do through their performance--make an opportunity for social advancement. Furthermore, just as George has fashioned a knight from a servant, Venturewell acknowledges his shaping of Jasper whom he rescued "even from the fall of fortune" and whose rise he describes in terms of tempered metal: "[I] give thee heate and growth, to be what now thou art, new cast thee" (I.2-4). Venturewell's bestowal of respectability on Jasper and his expectation of respectability for his family from acquiring Humphrey's wealth and name for Luce, points to upward social mobility as a significant issue in that middle class family, an issue which finds its parallel in George's family. Given the correspondences between Rafe and Humphrey and between Venturewell and George, the merchant couple can be seen to endorse movement into a social sphere higher than their own.

Since George and his wife applaud Humphrey and Venturewell, they are bound to condemn both Jasper, who thwarts Humphrey's plan to take Luce to wife, and also Merrythought, who overturns accepted social conventions and is immune to rebuke. Explanation of the merchants' attitude to these two characters finds a location in Greenblatt's third condition: "Self-fashioning is achieved in relation to something perceived as alien, strange, or hostile. This threatening Other . . . must be discovered or invented in order to be attacked and destroyed." In the context of the play this condition could be read such that anyone who scorns the social framework enforced and guarded by the *élite* would be received by the *élite* in a hostile manner: George and Nell denounce those characters who they think scorn the social stratification endorsed by the *élite*, but the couple misread the play and get the sympathies backwards. Those characters whom they do support are not only intended to be received unsympathetically, but such characters are extremely sensitive to issues of status and

wealth, which implies that the merchants are predisposed to defend vested interest. In condemning Jasper and Merrythought, George and Nell are condemning violation of social decorum, yet simultaneously their performance is flawed by such violations. Jasper and Merrythought care nothing for social conventions; indeed they scorn those conventions which prevent them from getting what they want out of life. George and Nell, on the other hand, care very much about social decorum; they don't want to rock the boat, they want to climb aboard it. They recognize that the only way to gain power is to imbue their wealth with the respectability of social status. Therefore, they try to recognize and support those ideals they think the upper classes support. Since the actions of Jasper and Merrythought largely contravene the expectations of those of authority or higher social rank, the couple launch a verbal attack on these characters.

The audience's first introduction to Jasper reveals him to have usurped his prescribed role as merchant's factor. In gaining Luce's affections Jasper can be seen to continue to shape his own social identity. Should the affair end in marriage, Jasper would have effected a considerable rise in status for himself. However, Nell and George denounce Jasper's "attempt at self-fashioning" because in gaining Luce, Jasper is preventing Humphrey from having her. Thus, in siding with Humphrey, the couple distinctly choose the claim of the "gentleman" over that of the apprentice--a member of their own class. And of course, Venturewell would rather see Luce marry Humphrey, a man of some station seemingly, than Jasper, a mere apprentice. George, siding with Venturewell who is trying to effect a liaison between his money and Humphrey's position and wealth in marrying his daughter to him, finds he cannot condone the disobedience of the apprentice. Having listened to the couple's plan to

be rid of Luce's gentleman suitor, George refers to Jasper and Luce as "infidels," which suggests not that they are religious unbelievers, but that they do not adhere to patriarchal, parental supremacy, a facet of the social hierarchy which enabled the titled to wield considerable power over the lower classes. The word "infidels" also urges recollection of Greenblatt's ideal of the Authority as absolute. Nell supports her husband when she says "well if I do not do his lesson for wronging the poore Gentleman, I am no true woman" (II.243). In act five where Jasper ridicules Venturewell in the ghostly confrontation, and forces the merchant to repentance out of fear, the reaction of Nell and George is to forget the scene as quickly as possible by bringing Rafe on again. Neither relishes the victory of Jasper over his betters. A glance at the historical situation might clarify George and Nell's dislike of Jasper. Concepts such as obedience to authority and the supremacy of the parental word were power principles particularly valued by the upper classes. George and Nell in denouncing Jasper and Merrythought and supporting the financial power of Venturewell and the social power of Humphrey are supporting such concepts.

Just as Jasper ignores social boundaries in defying Venturewell and Humphrey, and earns the castigation of George and Nell, so too does his father, Merrythought, earn their disdain. Merrythought acknowledges the value of few social rules, for instance decorum and respect, and certainly he does not advocate social mobility. For example, he has no care for his wife's or his second son's advancement in society; indeed, his cure for poverty is mirth not money. And his philosophical imperative to Jasper is:

Bee a good husband; that is, weare ordinary clothes, eate
the best meate, and drinke the best drinke, bee merrie and

give to the poore, and beleeeve mee, thou hast no end of
thy goods. (I.388-90)

An amusing dichotomy emerges on consideration of George and Nell's response to Merrythought. The merchant couple, who I suggest care much about their position in society, can only deal with Merrythought by treating him as a device for entertainment. Nell finds that when she does take him seriously, for example, when she admonishes him for his poor treatment of his wife, Merrythought is adept at turning his wit on her. To her rebuke

I had not thought in truth, maister Merriethought, that a
man of your age and discretion (as I may say) being a
Gentleman, and therefore knowne by your gentle conditions,
could have used so little respect to the weaknesse of his
wife: (III.534)

he replies

I come not hither for thee to teach,
I have no pulpit for thee to preach, (III.541-2)

to which Nell replies, discarding her genteel tone

Give me such words that am a gentlewoman born, hang him
hoary rascall. (III.549)

Merrythought not only devalues social decorum, but he uses Nell's weakness, her predisposition to act the part of a gentlewoman, to ridicule her, since she loses face when she lapses into street expletive. Merrythought, incidentally, reveals himself as an example of uninhibited self-expression since he lives his life and forwards his philosophies through the clown's medium of song. Even his method of communication proves his divorce from societal conventions.

These deliberate affiliations and renunciations notwithstanding, it is the creation of the knight, Rafe, which fixes the couple as distinctly attempting to fashion a social identity. Rafe is the dramatic embodiment of those values the couple interpret as a passport to a higher social arena. It is him they direct; it is through him that they display their wealth; and it is he whom they use to fight Jasper, thus showing their allegiance to the authority and status of Venturewell and Humphrey. On the superficial level of plot action, Rafe is a quixotic knight righting wrongs and rescuing damsels. And, on this same level, George's support of Rafe's deeds shows the merchant applauding the victory of good over evil. But Rafe is a knight of more than one dimension. True, he does represent that class of heroes popular in Iberian romances who seek out maidens to save and monsters to kill. And in the context of early 17th century endorsement of chivalry, the heroic ideal has a basis in this play. Stone attests to a revival of this aristocratic ideal which is explained by the need to protect a position of declining power (266). But Rafe can also be interpreted as belonging to that social class whose obligations to society were largely military, and whose numbers grew profusely with the accession of James 1st, only five years prior to the performance of the play (the majority of Rafe's exploits have a military dimension: he defeated the giant Barberosa; he fought Jasper; and he was called on to marshal men for a defense of London). Stone notes that the title of knight was one of the easiest for a man of lowly birth to obtain if he but showed allegiance to James. In addition to granting knighthoods himself, James gave the right to create knights to his courtiers. Eventually that right was bought and sold amongst the courtiers and financial speculators until it passed into "general currency" and mockery (274-77). This fact

provides another instance of opportunity for a merchant to practice upward social mobility. Thus, the character of the knight could suggest echoes to the audience of the growing inculcation of base born men into higher social ranks.

Rafe is an example of a self-fashioner who is motivated by his masters to perform to their credit. Initially he is a servant, but for his role in the play he is required to make the transition to tradesman and thence into knight.

But what brave spirit could be content to sit in his shop
with a flappet of wood and a blew apron . . . that might
pursue feats of Armes, and through his noble atchievements,
procure such a famous history to be written of his heroicke
provesse. (I.241)

and

. . . For amongst all the worthy books of Atchievements I
do not call to mind that I yet read of a Grocer Errant.
I will be the said Knight: (I.249-51).

Rafe, on his masters' orders, has made a public statement of intent to change his identity and consequently his status. Given his elevation in rank and the heroic nature of his exploits, George's responses to Rafe's deeds can be interpreted as gestures of alignment with upper class ideals and with the specific social arena of the gentlemen in the audience. Furthermore, George and Nell use the dramatic context of the performance to suspend deference to class division; and in offering Rafe as a knight, and thus supporting the medieval aristocratic ideals of honour and reputation practiced by Rafe and enjoying a resurgence in popularity, they offer themselves as eligible for social transfer. George and Nell are not

so much making a direct request for title or status in the play--although at certain points it is obvious that they seek the approval of the gentlemen explicitly--as they are trying to insinuate their worth for status by connecting themselves with heroic virtues through Rafe.

Rafe performs his heroic deeds with the benefit of a squire, a dwarf and a pestle, the latter intended as a reminder of his tradesman position. Likewise, George and Nell don't want to forget that they are middle class merchants; what they would like to do is embellish that position with a little social prestige. For instance, Rafe searches for Michael's stolen money, but relinquishes his search upon hearing that Jasper has taken Luce. Rafe is placing honour above money, though he would fight for the restitution of both.

Lady your pardon, that I may proceed
 Upon the quest of this injurious Knight.
 And thou fair Squire repute me not the worse,
 In leaving the great venture of the purse,
 And the rich casket till some better leasure. (II.279)

The connection between Rafe's decision and the merchant is that George, in possession of wealth, now wants to be seen to value other ideals, honour, for example. So proud of Rafe is the merchant that he forwards him as a representative of English knighthood when he suggests Rafe as embassy to the Cracovian court. He does so against the advice of the actors, who allude to the knight's base origins. George replies in defense of Rafe by citing two instances, historical and literary, of the elevation of an apprentice; in doing so he is paving the way for acceptance of the self-made man into higher social echelons. Rafe's adventures climax in feats showing his greatest talent, that of military leader. The apprentice

has completed his apprenticeship for knighthood and must now prove himself an able military commander. For this spectacle, George and Nell lend Rafe attributes of a scarf and a jerkin, visible tokens of their support and a clear reminder that they are to be identified with Rafe.

Greenblatt's condition that "self-fashioning is always, though not exclusively, in language" obviously applies to this particular performance which is conducted with ostentatious verbal gesture, but the condition assumes an even more interesting dimension when Nell is shown to allow herself some sort of social alignment with the audience through a calculated rhetorical approach. Throughout the play Nell has exhorted Rafe to be aware of the impact of his actions. As she calls for the battle where Rafe will defend London against an unarmed foe, she urges him to

. . . doe it bravely Rafe, and thinke before whom You
performe, and what person you represent. (V.63)

Rafe is to be courageous and perform well before the audience because he represents the grocer and his wife: Nell is calling on Rafe to remember not just that he is a knight, but that his heroic actions are intended to speak to the audience of the virtues of the merchant couple. And this is not the first time she calls on members of the audience. In her several addresses to the gentlemen spectators, Nell sets herself up as spokeswoman for the goals of the couple. Ordinarily, social convention forbade Nell from being too familiar with the upper classes.

Small merchants . . . were so styled [i.e. they called
themselves gentlemen] although they were still below the
line in public repute, and would hardly have considered
themselves in a position to converse on equal terms with
. . . a true landed gentleman or esquire. (Stone 50)

In a sense then, the term "gentlemen" is devalued by Nell's appropriation of it, considering her status. But Nell takes advantage of the dramatic context of the play and the theatre and suspends propriety in order to put herself on equal footing with the gentlemen. Her remarks to the audience take the forms of direct and indirect address. Particularly at the beginning of the play, Nell, and George, speak to the audience indirectly.

Hold up thy head Rafe, shew the Gentlemen what thou
canst doe, speake a huffing part, I warrant you the
Gentlemen will accept of it. (Induction.70)

and

. . . the Gentlemen will praise thee Raph, if thou plaist
thy part with audacity (II.98)

and

Cony, I can tell thee the Gentlemen like Rafe. (III.455)

The effect of this approach is two-fold. First, Nell is able to accrue power by degrees in suggesting that her ideas are endorsed by the gentlemen. And as if to support her, the audience make no response to disprove her affiliation with the spectators. Secondly, she intends Rafe's performance specifically for the audience, for she reminds him after his death speech

Well said Raph, doe your obeysance to the Gentlemen, and
go your waies, (V.328)

and prior to the battle she had cautioned Rafe to remember before whom he was performing. Nell's indirect speeches to the audience occur at the beginning of the play and they signify her anxiety that Rafe may not be accepted. But as the play gains in dramatic intensity, Nell gains in self-confidence to the point that she speaks directly to the gentlemen in a

tone of familiarity; she seems sure that Rafe has won the audience's approval.

Gentleman I thanke you all heartily for gracing my man Rafe, and I promise you you shall see him oftner. (III. 456-58)

And

Gentlemen, Il'e begin to you all, and I desire more of your acquaintance, with all my heart. (3.Interlude.4)

And finally she even proposes that they visit her at her home

George: Come Nel, shall we go, the Plaie's done.

Nell: Nay by my faith George, I have more manners than so, Il'e speake to these Gentlemen first: I thanke you all Gentlemen, for your patience and countenance to Raph, a poore fatherlesse child, and if I might see you at my house, it should go hard, but I would have a pottle of wine and a pipe of Tobacco for you, for truely I hope you do like the youth, but I would bee glad to know the truth: I refere it to your owne discretions, whether you will applaud him or no

(Epilogue.1-9)

By her intimations of equal social status with that of the audience, Nell has succeeded in breaking social boundaries. But the environment in which she publicizes her aspirations warrants consideration: because it is at the theatre that Nell is fashioning her new identity, she is also breaking the boundaries of illusion and reality when she attempts conversation with the audience. In fact, her addresses to the audience mark one aspect

of a performance which repeatedly undermines the illusion requisite to understanding drama and which is predestined to fail because the two performing are too entirely middle class to be able to sustain roles of sophistication and gentility.

At the occasion of the play, George and Nell adopt roles which show them wishing to embellish their middle class origins and wealth with upper class status, but they are also shown failing to see that those very characteristics in Jasper which they denounce are inherent in their own nature and responsible for their drive for more power. George tries to cultivate the values of the gentlemen in the audience (the authority) but he does not or cannot shrug off those elements in him which make him essentially middle class (the alien). Thus, referring to Greenblatt's condition, George's and Nell's roles partake "of both the authority and the alien that is marked for attack." Any identity George hopes to achieve is doomed because he is marked forever by those traits which define him as middle class; thus he cannot assume aristocratic attributes.

. . . but I will have a Citizen, and hee shall be of my
owne trade. (Induction.29)

George summons the power, the drive of inner resource which has made him a successful merchant and he tries to use this power theatrically to prove he has the ability to be a gentleman. But the performance through which he attempts to fashion his identity shows that he has none of the sophistication or the knowledge necessary to make of himself a gentleman. Greenblatt's final condition is also relevant here: "The power generated to attack the alien in the name of the authority is produced in excess and threatens the authority it sets out to defend." Application of this condition reveals that George's source of power is eventually what limits that

power. The middle class merchant who works hard to amass a lot of wealth in a society which is biased towards landed wealth and inherited status accumulates a degree of power just by virtue of succeeding in a competitive world. George takes that power and attempts to use it to present himself as worthy of a better social identity. But that power has its source in middle class values which dominate the performance whereas the adopted values of the nobility are overshadowed. Thus, the identity George and Nell hoped to confirm with the approval of the audience on their performance was doomed to subversion at the outset, as an examination of their performance will show.

Michael Shapiro provides a convincing argument about audience response at plays, which suggests a motive for the actions of George and Nell. According to Shapiro, private theatre spectators were deliberately either noisy or else silent. Whichever mood they chose, these auditors had in mind to create their own performance to counter the one they had come to see. And the motive, says Shapiro, was to assert social worth. What is more, the issue of audience response was important enough to find its way into the plays themselves. Shapiro cites several instances of playwrights who directly addressed their disruptive auditors. He includes Shakespeare's Love's Labors Lost and A Midsummer Night's Dream as examples containing rebukes to aristocratic characters who eagerly displayed their wit to the detriment of the performance. Thomas Dekker, in his parody of courtesy books, The Gull's Hornbook, advises his reader "How a Gallant should behave himself in a Playhouse," in chapter six. Shapiro adds "while Dekker may be overstating for satiric effect, the point would be lost were he not exaggerating a real phenomenon" (68). This matter suggests an interesting motive for George and Nell: they may

have chosen to involve themselves in the play so that they could "display themselves" and their insignia of wealth. Furthermore, they may have presented themselves in the posture of those aristocratic auditors who participated in performances to affirm their status as gentlemen with nothing better to do than while away the hours in a playhouse (Shapiro 71). The temptation for a spectator to create a role for himself was real, as was the opportunity to do so, but if a spectator did intend his performance to be taken seriously, as George did, then he would have had to carefully evaluate the effect of his performance on those whom he sought to impress.

IV

The success of self-dramatization lies largely in the ability to read an audience and fulfill certain expectations of that audience. Goffman's theory of performance points up that George's actions are indeed cultivated to impress and also that his ignorance of the social conventions and manners of those he seeks to impress, reduces the credibility of his presentation; in fact, it reduces George to a spectacle.

Goffman's theory of performance provides a way of studying social life, in particular, the way a person presents himself to others. Goffman observes human behaviour from a theatrical perspective and his interpretations are based on two main assumptions: any individual in the presence of others desires to project and conceal attributes of his character, and any audience desires to acquire information about a "performer" in order to know what to expect of him (Goffman 1-2). The information presented to the audience of The Knight enlightens them to the fact that George and his

wife are not able to imbue their adopted roles with any degree of authenticity.

The following characteristics provide a particularly useful framework for analyzing George's actions as part of a cultivated theatrical performance.⁶

1. Performance itself is the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which seems to influence in any way any of the other participants (15).
2. The preestablished pattern of action which occurs during a performance is a part or a routine (16).
3. With regard to this part or role, when an individual assumes a part, he implicitly asks his observers to take seriously the impression fostered before them (17).
4. The front is that part of the individual's performance which is designed to define the situation and which employs expressive equipment to do so. It is that part of the image the performer is eager to portray. In order for the front to be received as an effective posture, there must be consistency between the setting of the performance and the personal front of the performer. Personal front includes those characteristics which contribute to the role the performer intends to play, for example, clothing, sex, age, insignia of social rank, language, and tone. Such characteristics form the two categories of appearance and manner (22-25).
5. When a performer collaborates with another performer, the two--or more--compose a team. The success of the performance depends on the complete co-operation of team members. To show disagreement or any

form of non-co-operation threatens the reality of the roles conveyed (104).

6. The region is any place which is bounded to some degree by barriers to perception. The performance itself takes place in the front region, where the aim of the performer is to give the appearance that his activity maintains certain standards, for example, politeness, decorum, morality, duty, gentility, any value which contributes to the credibility of the role (106-07).

Although all of the above features are fundamental to George's performance, special emphasis is required for two concepts in particular: 1) inconsistency between personal front and setting, and 2) team effort.

All of the couples' actions from the moment they step up on stage until they withdraw at the end of the play constitute a performance. Their performance is directed toward convincing the audience that they are worthy aspirants to social prestige; consequently, they have adopted the roles of director and theatre critic to prove their eligibility for mobility. In order for these roles to be considered credible by the audience, George and Nell must be sincere in their roles and they must be seen to expect their audience to take them seriously; however, since the couple do much to destroy the credibility of their roles, performance is flawed; thus the audience will not be impressed.

George and Nell have assumed the roles of critic and director before a basically upper class audience. Such roles necessitate that the actors sustain at least the illusion of competence, both individually and as a team, if they are to convince the audience of their integrity (Goffman 104). The merchants do not sustain the illusion of sophisticated theatre patrons; therefore, the audience is alienated and the merchants' sincere

attempt to shape a new social identity has reduced them to a mere spectacle, an entertainment. George and Nell have managed to destroy the credibility of the roles they have assumed in several ways. First, George takes a risk in designating himself director of the performance because he has to make suggestions which will please the audience. But he will not win the audience's approval for himself as a social climber, since in requesting a serious treatment of a grocer, he has drawn attention to his class origins. Moreover, his deliberate display of wealth is unsophisticated and clearly reveals that while George does have power because of his wealth, his money is his only major source of power. This fact undermines his position because it points up, by contrast, his lack of that power derived from the prestige of social status. If these actions do little to narrow the social distance between himself and the gentleman audience, further examples of the way he and his wife execute their roles can only convince the spectators of the couple's ignorance of plays and audiences.

Goffman proposes that when an individual plays a part he implicitly asks his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them. At the same time, those observers will be scrutinizing the actor to detect whether he is fully taken in by his own act and therefore sincere, or whether he is cynical, and not for one moment deluded by his own performance. Given those aspects of the play which show George as a self-fashioner, I suggest that George is sincere, that he fully believes he is offering a realistic impression of a sophisticated spectator; he believes that he is portraying the role of a literate theatre patron, someone acquainted with the customs and conventions of the theatre, someone who knows the plays and the players. His repeated, inept dropping of titles such as "Rafe and Lucrece" and "Confutation of St. Paul" attest to

this belief. Moreover, his assertiveness in taking control of the stage immediately, indicates his confidence in his role.

Setting, those aspects of environment, including decor, furniture and scenery, which provide the backdrop for a performance (Goffman 22), is vitally important in this instance. The setting of the theatre, and particularly of the stage, provides the impetus, as well as the backdrop for George's performance: he has an audience, he has an opportunity, and he has a reason to perform, and the trappings of the theatre serve to highlight the occasion of his performance. Setting in this particular play is also important because the context of the stage demands a clear line of demarcation between actors and audience, although this line was not always honoured on the Jacobean stage. Shapiro mentions that Blackfriars theatre was particularly prone to having patrons sit on the stage and interfere with the action (71). Whereas many spectators sat on the stage to heckle (Shapiro 70), George crossed the boundary between actors and audience in order to give himself opportunity for self-dramatization--the objective in each instance was to upstage the actors and thus deflect attention to the one interrupting. George, conforming to a historical role not merely of the Jacobean audience but of the élite Blackfriars audience, separated himself from his co-auditors and stepped up onto the stage, calling for stools for himself and his wife. By virtue of this act alone he assumed a new role, in this instance, that of director.

Having assumed his new role, George must present a posture in keeping with that of an idle gentleman educated to plays and performances. If he wants to invite approval for social transfer he must be seen to be eligible for it, and this includes having, or seeming to have, the appearance and manner of a member of higher rank. But George does not

preserve the manner of a gentleman born. For instance, he does not enhance his credibility as a cultured patron when he calls for a serious dramatic defense of merchants because The London Merchant, the intended play, was a burlesque of a grocer designed to entertain an audience with an upper class cast. His dramatic revisions would call for the audience to view the grocer with deference, something they would probably not be eager to do, given class differences, and, specific to the time, the rise in merchant wealth and the decline of upper class wealth. Furthermore, upon being questioned by the Speaker of the Prologue, George reveals that he himself is a grocer. The Speaker uses this fact to toy with George for the amusement of the audience. It would seem that since George is a member of the middle class, he is not worthy of any particular measure of respect. After ascertaining George's three titles--member of the city of London, freeman, and grocer--the Speaker deliberately uses the third, least socially prestigious, when he addresses George. Moreover when he says to George "You seem to be an understanding man," there is a likelihood that the Speaker is punning on "stand below," a reference to the pit which catered to the least socially respected members of the audience at public theatres (Fraser and Rabkin 521). Seemingly unaware of the pun, George proceeds to request a play in honour of grocers, and he makes his request in a haughty, dictatorial manner, probably thinking it in keeping with the demeanour of a powerful man. But having been exposed as a grocer with the goal of applauding grocers, George cannot now sustain the illusion that he is a gentleman. So George's personal front (appearance and manner) is not taken seriously either by the boy actors, or, by implication, the audience. The Speaker of the Prologue continues to jest and when George's requests become outrageous, the actors make pleas to the gentlemen in the audience

that they might be rescued from George's designs. In calling for and getting major revisions in the performance, primarily the insertion of his servant as knight, George is showing that he has some power, but he is destined to be laughed at because his requests are unsophisticated, and as such they undermine the power he employs to get those requests.

Nell and George have each other to bolster their respective performances, but they still do not make a good team; either one side lets the other down, or their co-operation at any given moment reveals a crude delight in violence which absorbs them to the point that they fail to maintain their roles. There are several instances which show George's irritation at his wife for talking too much or for interfering in the play in a way he disapproves of. Nell's remarks usually stem from an overabundance of enthusiasm. When she rails at the audience for their indulgence in smoking and ends her comment with an exuberant cry for Rafe, her husband orders her to be quiet. He again tells her to "Hold [her] tongue" when she interrupts Rafe's opening speech with a piece about giants and ettins stealing the king of Portugal's meat. Furthermore, Nell's frequent interjections of a trivial nature such as this reinforce her initial remark that she has not been to many plays (Induction.50)--the implication being that she is ignorant of behavioural conventions.

Sometimes, George's attitude to Nell suggests that he is irritated by her particular kind of dramatic interference. For instance, when Mistress Merrythought tells her husband that she thinks Jasper has run away, Nell explains Jasper's true predicament, to which George replies

by my troth, Cunnie if there were a thousand boies, thou
wouldst spoile them all with taking their parts, let his
mother alone with him. (I.372)

Later, when Nell is upset at the thought of Merrythought's mistreatment of his wife, George baits her, knowing that Nell will be angry to think of her husband taking Merrythought's side. He is right, and a squabble ensues. George has compromised his purposed image of knowledgeable theatre patron so that he can goad his wife. These instances of friction and even open disagreement threaten the impression George and Nell are trying to create.

Even when they are not disagreeing, their comments to each other show their performance is flawed because they reveal a thirst for violence which momentarily consumes them so that they forget the impression they wish to make. Nell likes nothing better than to see Rafe "kill all that comes near him" and George affirms his enjoyment of such scenes. When George and Nell enter vicariously into the fight between Rafe and Barberosa, they are shown to have abandoned decorum. They coach Rafe at every blow, urging him to "kill, kill, kill, kill, kill."

One final amusing instance of team cooperation occurs at the point where the merchant and his wife speculate on the whereabouts of Jasper and Luce, as Venturewell sets out to find them. Their speculations take the form of a wager, and the dialogue shows the couple once more oblivious to their roles or to the audience, so intent are they on arguing their respective points.

The faults in the performance elicited by application of Goffman's concepts are facets of a larger, more general problem, namely the couple's inability to read a play and an audience. This inability manifests itself in several ways. Most obviously the two fail to endorse the play's solutions to problems concerning love and money, which is important to the satire: the play advocates the victory of love over money and status, but

George and Nell are unable to see this as a primary goal of the action, which suggests that their preoccupation with money blinds them to other important issues. Moreover, George and Nell are unaware that they need to suspend disbelief when viewing the action; instead, they read a literal interpretation of dramatic events. An offshoot of their ignorance is the failure to recognize that their constant commentary interferes directly with the play. And their repeated interference shows them revealing decidedly boorish character traits. A final manifestation of their inability to read plays and audiences is Nell's stepping out of character when she discourses with Merrythought.

George and Nell completely misunderstood the dramatist's viewpoint of his characters, since they side with the villain, the fool, and the gold-digger--Venturewell, Humphrey and Mistress Merrythought--who represent vested interest. Yet Beaumont, by his portrayal of these characters, fully intended them to be received unsympathetically. And Jasper, who is sketched as rational, clever and appealing is put down at every turn by the merchants (Doebler xviii). As the couple lack dramatic sophistication with regard to matters of character, so they do with respect to plot and stage concerns.

An important instance of the couple's failure to sustain roles is clearly their inability to suspend disbelief when viewing the action; they enter into a literal reading of the events before them, and what is more, Nell cannot even do that properly. She either misses or forgets "the entire point of Luce's love for Jasper over Humphrey, to say nothing of the details of the plot by which Jasper and Luce plan to meet each other in the forest" (Doebler xvi). Nell also tries to destroy dramatic irony by informing the characters of developments in the plot. Her purpose, for

example in telling Mistress Merrythought that Jasper was turned out by Venturewell, is to tell the truth, as she puts it; but in telling the truth so often she employs herself to the detriment of the play's success. In refusing to enter into the spirit of the performance, and therefore suspend her disbelief, in insisting on reading actual human behaviour for illusion, Nell is violating the artistic decorum intrinsic to drama. Moreover, by interpreting events literally and with a bourgeois tint George and Nell make fools of themselves; they become material for satire (Doebler xv).

In their desire to dramatize themselves both husband and wife interrupt the production constantly--thus dissolving any remaining barriers of illusion--usually for little reason other than to offer inane remarks which reinforce their ignorance. Their displays of ignorance and boorishness are particularly detrimental to the success of the performance since gentlemanly behaviour would be a prerequisite to aristocratic bearing. Theoretically, nobility was synonymous with standards of politeness, decorum, morality and gentility; although in reality, such virtues were often abandoned by members of the upper classes--for instance at the theatre (Shapiro 70). This implicit double standard puts even more burden on the merchant to perform successfully since he is obliged to adopt the posture and manners of a man of gentility before an audience which could choose to compromise their own genteel demeanour on whim. And the couple are indeed obliged to behave in a genteel way if they are to prove themselves worthy of higher social rank. Only later, their performance approved, could the couple safely display less gentlemanly behaviour.

Nell is by far the worse of the two in revealing crude attitudes and language suggestive of a middle class lack of refinement. When Rafe

discourses on the decline in genteel manners toward women, which amounts to a replacement of euphemism with rudeness, Nell responds,

I'le be sworne will they Rafe, they have cal'd mee
[damned bitch] an hundred times about a scurvy pipe of
Tobacco. (I.239)

Nell supplements an expertise in the vulgar vernacular with references like "hoary rascal" and "a whoreson tyrant"; her detailed crude folk remedies and her salacious remarks about the actors also fall into this category. Furthermore, she complements this lack of refinement and education with a primitive belief in superstition.

. . . but a Giant is not so soone converted as one of us
ordinary people. (III.422)

The overall portrait she paints of herself is far distant from that of the gentlewoman she would like to present. More often than not she is boorish, but in her addresses to the audience and in her dialogue with Merrythought there are suggestions that Nell tries to make her language as elevated as her social pretensions.

At the beginning of the play she practices familiarity with the gentlemen by inferring that she is of their social standing and therefore able to view the play from their perspective.

Sit you merry all Gentlemen, Im'e bold to sit amongst you
for my ease. (Prologue.106)

Although her remarks to the gentlemen are not distinguished for their fine language, a contrast is evident between these and those remarks about the actors and the folk medicine cures, simply because the former comments lack the vulgarity of the latter. This contrast points up her conscious intent, but unsustained attempt, to adopt the posture of a gentlewoman.

Also, she expostulates to George about Humphrey's gentility in a manner more in keeping with her role as a "gentle" wife--though her intent is undermined by her delivery:

By my faith and troth George, and as I am vertuous, it is
e'ne the kindest yong man that ever trod on shooe leather.

(I.197)

But it is in her confrontation with Merrythought that Nell most clearly steps out of character. She begins in simpering verbosity gently to admonish Merrythought for his mistreatment of his wife. Merrythought's pithy refutation of Nell's advice is greeted with her angry response

Give me such words that am a gentlewoman borne, hang
him hoary rascall (III.549)

Nell shows herself to be clearly inept at sustaining the role of gentlewoman and reveals her inability to read and employ the social conventions of one of high standing. Yet for all their ill-breeding, perhaps the couple's performance is not a complete failure.

V

There is much evidence in the play to indicate that George and Nell proffer a miserable performance in the roles of gentlefolk, evidence which, when viewed from the perspective of a Greenblatt-Goffman approach offers a new dimension to our understanding of the play. To clarify, selected application of the two descriptive apparatuses shows how systematically comic and boorish the merchants are, though they appear to request serious consideration of their presentation. Steeped in middle class attitudes, the two are unable to prove that they can adopt aristocratic values with

any measure of seriousness and credibility. Beaumont, by inserting middle class pretension into a basically upper class atmosphere, did satirize his characters well. Because the play was such a good burlesque of merchant ambition, then, it should have been successful because it allowed the upper class members of the audience an opportunity to reinforce their sense of superiority over the class represented by George and Nell. However, as has been stated, the first production failed. This suggests the possibility that despite their failed performance, Nell and George yet posed a threat to the audience of The Knight. Doebler's claim mentioned earlier, referring to Burre's epistle, suggests that the audience did not enjoy Beaumont's play because the auditors were too unsophisticated to understand the implicit ironies. There seems to be some truth in this, for it is likely that Beaumont intended to project ironic distance between himself and his merchants, but that distance may well have been subordinated by the audience of The Knight to the harsh reality of the rising middle class in Jacobean society. It is also likely that the playwright's decision not to thoroughly deride George and Nell has something to do with poor reception of the performance.

Most of the enjoyment the audience would have experienced devolves on what might be called satire of juxtaposition. Nell and George are satirized largely by being placed in direct opposition to a social class whose manners and conventions they try, unsuccessfully, to emulate. The merchants would be perceived by the audience of The Knight as amusing because that audience is encouraged to acknowledge a sharp, comic contrast between the affected manners of the couple and their own presumed gentility. Curiously, Beaumont relies only on this method of creating satire in his play. Few or no instances of humour specifically derive

from his deliberate exploitation of opportunities with which to deflate the grocers. Therefore, there is room to suppose that Beaumont's derision of his characters is not thorough, that he did not intend to condemn them completely. For instance, when, in Act III, George inserts himself into the illusion of the play to pay the tapster twelve shillings (III.176), the audience of The London Merchant could have been induced to jeer, or the actors might have made some facetious comment. They do not do so. Nell's superstitious pronouncements on giants (III.422) and her crude folk remedies might also have incited some sneers. Again, there are none. Indeed, the play abounds with unexploited opportunities for Beaumont to allow a spokesman to put down the actions of the couple and thereby allow the audience of The Knight to entertain the notion that the dramatist also scorns his merchants. But he does not forward such a spokesman.

Not only does Beaumont not allow the reader to make a strong connection between the stupidity of the grocer and the dramatist's public acknowledgement of that stupidity, but at times he seems deliberately to create situations wherein the fictional audience and the actors could condemn the grocers, but then he does not attend to such opportunities; he deliberately confounds audience expectations. When George first assumes his office as director, the response of the boy player is to cast aspersions on the merchant's lowly status--probably for the benefit of the audience--but as the Speaker of the Prologue becomes apprised of George's determination, he backs down and grants the requests. Beaumont has relinquished a good chance to undercut the merchant's presumption. Perhaps the most telling instances of the dramatist allowing George to continue unrebuked occur at those places where the actors offer

apologies and plead with the spectators to intervene to stop George; yet the audience, given the chance to thwart George's plans, respond to none of the addresses. Wishing to see Jasper defeated, George and Nell demand a fight between Rafe and Jasper which the actors are afraid will ruin their play. On seeing that George is adamant, the boy actor can only reply lamely to George

Why sir he shall; but if anie thing fall out of order,
the Gentlemen must pardon us. (II.267)

And when the couple threaten the play by calling for a fight between Rafe and the giant, dismissing Mistress Merrythought's speech in the process, the actors show their exasperation in a plea to the audience

You'le utterly spoile our Play, and make it to be hist,
and it cost money, you will not suffer us to go on with
our plot, I pray Gentlemen rule him. (III.294)

Later, resigned to the mutilation of their play, the actors apologise

It is not our fault, gentlemen. (IV.49)

Indeed, it is not their fault, for the impotence of the actors and the policy of nonintervention adopted by the audience point to a deliberate move on Beaumont's part to restrict direct censure of his merchants. In not thoroughly denouncing George and Nell--their performance does after all, render them charming, even endearing--Beaumont may have encouraged those in the audience "who felt their status declining" to take "the intrusion as an unpleasant omen" (Shapiro 77).

There is a further indication of Beaumont's decision not to reduce the merchants to complete mockery: they do embody certain values which would be respected by all Englishmen, values such as nationalism (Nell wants a scene where Rafe defends London), bravery (they want Rafe to kill

a lion with a pestle, and defeat the giant Barberosa), and a love for native custom (they demand a representation of May day festivities), all of which argue for a partial redemption of the pair from the ridicule attendant to satire.

In identifying the upstarts with values of nationalism, bravery, and native custom, and in not allowing any of his characters directly to condemn Nell and George, Beaumont is actually endorsing the couple's actions to some degree. This endorsement, by association with the merchants' pretensions, may well have caused the play, and specifically the grocers, to be perceived as threatening.

I realize that my reading of George and Nell's actions as threatening is in the realm of speculation regarding audience response, but the instability of the social situation as outlined by Stone does support such speculation. Thus, any representation of a rising middle class, seen as it would be in the early 1600's against the background of the financial instability of the upper classes, would be anxiety-causing. Furthermore, if tensions in the theatre are a valid, though partial, indicator of actual social tensions, the supposition that the real life threat was carried over into the play and assumed by the audience of The Knight, is a plausible one: George's dramatization is a reminder to his spectators that a pretentious middle class merchant, with his base origins and ignorance of culture, could and was, gaining access to the social status of a preferred few--in the theatre and elsewhere.

And, of course, a basic assumption of satire is important in this play: if George and Nell, and those social aspirants represented by the couple, were so harmless, why were they satirized? More importantly, why did the audience, by refusing to respond verbally to the performance,

react so defensively? Shapiro's speculations on audience posture are helpful here. As I mentioned before, he suggests that spectators adopted the roles of noisy interrupters or silent, detached scorers to effect a counter-performance to the one they paid money to come and see (70). Obviously, George chose the former category out of which to fashion his role. In having the audience of The London Merchant remain silent, despite efforts at communication by the actors and the merchants, Beaumont seems to infer anxiety on the part of that audience. In turn, it is possible that the audience of The Knight picked up on this anxiety and reinforced it with their own. As the play progressed and the reality of the financial power of a wealthy merchant became clearer, that power became more and more oppressive. Money could buy status just as the lack of it could bankrupt a centuries-old family. The couple speak directly to the audience, the boy actors plead for help from the audience, yet not once does a member of the audience respond to either the actors or to the self-fashioners. They are probably too busy dealing with the dramatic reminder of the changing distribution of power. And in spite of the merchants' failed performance, it is that medium of the performance which cements the fact that the couple are a threat. The dramatic context of George's self-fashioning, which amounts to a ceremony of induction into a higher social rank, forces the audience to register a public recognition of the couple's hope for social mobility, and so George and Nell pave the way for future performances by future self-fashioners. The credibility of the identity they have created is doubtful, but in taking the liberty of commanding dramatic power they have achieved a temporary supremacy.

In addition to the actions of Nell and George which possibly make them seem threatening, the autonomy they derive as actors, though

temporary, also makes them seem powerful and threatening. Conversely, by virtue of their passive response, the audience of The London Merchant can be seen to suffer a decline in their power in the face of George's improvisation. Because of the sensitivity of the social change George is campaigning for, his power as an actor does have reverberations outside the theatre, reverberations which also bring into question the nature of the power of the audience of The Knight. Nell and George in desiring to make a plea for upward social mobility through a specific kind of performance, suspend adherence to lines of social demarcation for the duration of the play. In contrast to this newly acquired leverage of the couple, the autonomy of the upper class audience would be limited by the need to defend class divisions. Loyal to the concept of separating the "noble from the ignoble" (Stone 49), the spectators would want to support--not seek to redefine--those divisions which protected not just their power but also their identity, rooted in an undiluted class structure--the audience would be bound to sustain an attitude of defence against George's claim. George, less restricted by a need to preserve his power, indeed motivated by the desire to expand it, is free to challenge the prevailing structure through his role, and therefore he exercises a degree of autonomy greater than that of the spectators--in spite of his failed performance.

VI

The principal objective of this analysis has been to emphasize that Beaumont's play exhibits a socio-political depth which urges a more serious consideration of the play as an indicator of social change, and

which points up the playwright's ability to effectively dramatize issues of social friction current in his time. Previous interpretations of the play have shed light on the author's satiric intent and on the presumption of the middle class, but they have dealt little with the historical significance which owes its discovery to Greenblatt's observation that self-fashioning was an integral part of Renaissance life. From George's performance, and the reactions of the audience of The London Merchant, we see that the concern with identity is supremely important--whether the goal is to create a new identity, or to preserve the power associated with an existing one. Moreover, the specifically dramatic attempt to create or reaffirm identity becomes sharply focused through analysis derived from Goffman's approach to performance. Application of the theories of Greenblatt and Goffman, by providing an apparatus for describing action and response, has provided the foundation for two interpretive claims: that George's goal is to create a specific identity with which to be considered a member of the elite, and that his wish for upward social mobility could be perceived by the audience as yet another attempt to dilute the blue blood of the aristocracy whose declining power base was rooted in land, heredity, and tradition. In turn, these claims, against the backdrop of class instability argued by Stone, have facilitated a look at Beaumont's play which urges its ability to register class tensions and perhaps even to change society: not only is George a dramatic example of a middle class merchant who has acquired power by accumulating wealth independently of the hard work of retainers, but his performance also foreshadows the impending prominence of the middle class in society after the Renaissance period. It was no doubt sobering for the audience of The Knight to acknowledge that the tensions between themselves and the two

self-fashioners were not just restricted to an isolated instance of a two hour entertainment at a playhouse.

Notes

¹ Play citations refer to the edition by Fredson Bowers, The Dramatic Works in the Beaumont and Fletcher Canon. Bowers clarifies the textual situation of The Knight, pointing out what text his edition is based on, and points to notable editions of the play. The manuscript from which the first edition was printed, the only substantive edition of the play, was a good one, and must have been either Beaumont's original, or a transcript of this. Two other quartos were published, in 1635 and in 1679; however, Bowers' edition is based on a collation of the nine extant copies of Q1. The Knight of the Burning Pestle is a much-edited play; the following are among the most notable contributors: Langbaine, 1711; Sympson, 1750; Colman, 1778; Weber, 1812; Dyce, 1843; J. St Loe Strachey, "The Mermaid Series," 1887; Herbert S. Murch, "Yale Studies in English, XXXIII," 1908; Raymond M. Alden, "The Belles-Lettres Series," 1910; G. B. Harrison, "The Fortune Play Books," 1926; C. F. Tucker Brooke and N. B. Paradise, "English Drama," 1933; Hazelton Spencer, "Elizabethan Plays," 1933 (3-6).

² My discussion of George's social aspirations is not specific to a particular social class; rather, I hope to show that he is looking for any title or status which will bestow respectability on his money. Therefore, I shall use terms such as *élite*, nobility, upper classes and so forth, with flexibility, to indicate George's wish for upward social mobility in general, not for mobility to a particular social rank.

³ Charles Mills Gayley offers an examination of the text to argue that authorship of The Knight is wholly attributable to Beaumont. This claim is also made by Fredson Bowers, John Doeblner and Andrew Gurr.

⁴ Internal reference to Don Quixote suggests a later performance date of The Knight; but Andrew Gurr argues that the dramatist could have known much about the romance without having read Shelton's translation which did not appear till 1612 (2-3).

⁵ Shapiro tempers Harbage's argument for a wholly aristocratic audience at Blackfriars with his speculation that such private theatres catered to those who could afford admission prices. Thus, the theatre was not exclusively for upper class patrons, and the probability that wealthy middle class spectators attended plays is a strong one (68). However, the main point here is that middle class patrons would have private--and public, considering George--aspirations to the status enjoyed by the upper class auditors.

⁶ Each of Goffman's major technical terms used in this study is underlined once in the introductory listing and once in the text as a means of introduction. Thereafter, the terms are not underlined.

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A FAILED PERFORMANCE IN SELF-FASHIONING: AN INTERPRETATION OF
FRANCIS BEAUMONT'S THE KNIGHT OF THE BURNING PESTLE

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ABSTRACT

By looking at Francis Beaumont's play The Knight of the Burning Pestle from a sociological and historical viewpoint we gain a new perspective on the dramatist's comic exploration of the manners and aspirations of an ambitious middle class couple. Much has been made of the ridiculousness of the actions of the merchant couple; yet closer inspection of their absurd efforts at posturing yields a deeper significance than has been accorded this play previously. Stephen Greenblatt's historical theory of self-fashioning in his Renaissance Self-Fashioning from More to Shakespeare points up George and Nell's deliberate cultivation of a prestigious social identity, so that they are seen to be distinctive self-fashioners with a serious goal in mind. But there is inconsistency between the aristocratic roles adopted by the merchants and the couple's enactment of those roles. Application of tenets from Goffman's Presentation of Self in Everyday Life to the grocers' actions reveals that the behavioural strategies of self-presentation universal to mankind are comically exaggerated and skewed when employed by George and Nell. The merchants' performance in self-fashioning is therefore a failure, but it does, however, accrue some small measure of power when it is viewed against the historical backdrop of the early Jacobean era. In his Crisis of the Aristocracy: 1558-1641 Lawrence Stone attests to a weakening of the socio-political power of the upper classes, a weakening which might have encouraged the audience of the first production of the play to have received the pretensions of George and Nell defensively. Perhaps the idea that the couple generate anxiety in the élite audience of The Knight has a connection with the fact of the failure of the first performance.