

Women and the Consumption of News in Ben Jonson's *The Staple of News* ❖

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ABSTRACT

First staged in 1626, when the newspaper industry was burgeoning due to the British public's curiosity about the Thirty Year's War, Ben Jonson's *The Staple of News* reflects the dramatist's anxiety about the availability of the news to women and members of the lower class. In early modern England, for fear of social unrest, news was taken as an exclusive privilege of the aristocracy, members of the social elite who were supposed to have the capacity for critical judgment. However, the advent of the news media disrupted this privilege. The newspapers' accessibility to both sexes and to all classes liquidated traditional boundaries, threatening the established power hierarchy. In this play, therefore, Jonson satirizes the social manners and tastes of his contemporary readers. He likens the circulation of news to the vulgar to upper-class women's frequenting taverns, seeing the consumption of news as a gullible, feminized fashion. In doing so, he reaffirms the educational value of the theater and defends the elitist and patriarchal hierarchies of his day.

KEYWORDS: Ben Jonson, *The Staple of News*, women as consumers, commodities, the early modern news business

❖ I am deeply grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their comments and criticism. I also want to dedicate my greatest thanks to Professor Barbara Bono (Department of English, SUNY at Buffalo) and my friend, Rita Ming-Hsiu Chen, for reading and commenting this essay before its submission.

* Received: July 7, 2014; Accepted: September 10, 2016
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Ben Jonson's play *The Staple of News* was first entered in the Stationer's Register in 1626, when the circulation of *corantos* (single news-sheets in folio size) started to be released with regularity in London due to the English people's concern about the Thirty Years' War. Although the fighting never extended to the British isles, the competition among continental European nations, driven by commercial and political interests and religious beliefs, unquestionably captured the interest of the English people. Especially after James I's son-in-law Frederick accepted the crown of Bohemia, the English people were eager to know immediately the latest news from the continent.

The English news trade thrived due to people's curiosity and their anxiety about the impending war on the continent, and London's printers started to print and disseminate European news regularly.¹ As Sara Pearl notes, the English commoners' exposure to the *regularly-released corantos* was "entirely without precedent," despite the fact that these early newspapers were in the form of direct translations of Dutch news-sheets printed in Amsterdam (61).² By October 1622, the folio-size *corantos* were replaced by quartos, roman-letter newsbooks published weekly by a series of syndicated London printers, and reading the news became an innovative way for the common people to comment on and criticize current political and religious affairs.

As Mark Z. Muggli and Jane Rickard point out, the Jonsonian masques of the early 1620s display Jonson's disdainful attitude toward the developing news media. Both critics find that the poet/playwright increasingly saw newspapers as competing with the upper-class medium of poetry (Muggli 323-29; Rickard 298-305). They point out that in his 1620 masque, *News from the New World*, Jonson contrasts the false rumors provided by the news media with the truths delivered by poetry; in *The Staple of News* (1626) he again criticizes the "news trade" from an ethical standpoint, accusing it of spreading fabricated rumors. In "A Divided Jonson," Rickard argues that in *The Staple of News* the playwright considers the developing news media to be disseminators of fabricated news, and is highly critical of its claim to be presenting the truth (301-05).

¹ On the historical background of the early modern news trade, see Joseph Frank 1-20; Antony Parr, 22-23; Julie Sanders 185; Mark Z. Muggli 328; and Sara Pearl 61.

² According to Anthony Parr, newspapers at this time could only report on foreign news. Domestic reporting remained banned by the Star Chamber until 1641 (22).

Here Rickard says that Jonson, adhering to Sir Philip Sidney's viewpoint in *The Defense of Poesie*, was claiming that his art—as represented by his theatrical productions and poetry—could “present larger truths about art and life” than could the news media (305). She also points out that throughout the play Jonson is exploring the parallels between his theater and the various forms of news, in order to show his audiences that his dramatic art can better present truth than can newsbooks (298). Indeed, the idea that news could be turned into a cheap, widely-circulated commodity was seen as being a cultural taboo by Jonson and his fellow aristocrats, who considered it to be a privilege of the social elite. As Sara Pearl argues in “Sounding to Present Occasions,” both King James and Jonson agreed that “comment on matters of state was beyond the capacities of ordinary people” and that such matters, involving as they did the concept of a higher truth, should be reserved for the social elite (61).

Indeed, King James feared that transmitting the news to the vulgar would mean making them aware of religious and political issues about which they lacked the ability to make sound judgments, so he banned the common people from discussing current political and religious affairs. In “A Proclamation against Excesse of Lavish and Licentious Speech of Matters of State” implemented in December 1620, the King clearly told his subjects that discussions of foreign policy were “mysteries of state” which had attracted “too much bold censure” of late. He asserted that matters of state were beyond the reach or capacity of ordinary people and should be reserved for the social elite (qtd. in Larkin and Hughes 495). The fact that the rapidly expanding news trade could quickly spread street gossip and alehouse rumors to the vulgar greatly challenged the Jacobean social elite's authority when it came to commenting on political and religious affairs. In *The Staple of News*, Jonson harshly attacked the stories in the *corantos* as being “made all at home” and as containing “no syllable of truth” in them (“To the Reader” 13).³ He also opposed the newsmongers' irresponsible sale of unconfirmed news, claiming vulgar newspaper readers were too ignorant to detect fabricated rumors.

³ As noticed by Mark Z. Muggli, Sara Pearl and Alan B. Farmer, *The Staple of News* has two texts—the 1626 performed text and the 1631 printed text (Muggli 330; Pearl 61-3; Farmer 129-30). The major difference between them is Jonson's note “To the Reader” inserted to the 1631 printed text. And, as Farmer's research on the politics of play reading indicates, Jonson inserts this note for the fear that his readers of the printed text, like some playgoers before them, cannot interpret his comment on the news media correctly (128).

Critics like Mugli and Rickard have mostly focused on the relationship between *The Staple of News* and the advent of the early modern news culture. However, Don E. Wayne takes a wider perspective, looking at how the rise of capitalism impacted the commercial theater and print industry in early modern England (69). He finds that during this period, the circulation of capital combined with new communication technologies to produce a hybrid culture that blended upper-class elite culture and lower-class popular culture (69). Wayne argues that it is above all this newly-formed hybrid culture that gave rise to Jonson's anxiety. For Jonson, after all, who saw his literary productions as a form of aesthetic capital, the appearance of the new medium challenged commercial theater's monopoly as a shaper of public opinion. This competition for market share as well as audience share propelled him to adopt a harshly critical attitude toward the new medium (74-86). D. F. McKenzie similarly points out that before the appearance of the newspaper, the commercial theater was the only institution with the authority to inform and comment on public opinion. Thus, the appearance of newspapers greatly threatened and challenged the public theater's privilege as the arbiter of public opinion (177-83).

The "invention" of the newspaper was a revolutionary movement in the development of the British mass media. While Jonson's play undoubtedly displays his prejudices and anxieties about newspapers, *The Staple of News* also undeniably enlivens that monumental historical moment when Britain moved from a social order in which theater was the only public medium to one in which theater coexisted with other forms of mass media (184-87). Both Wayne and McKenzie examine *The Staple of News* in relation to commercial theater, nascent capitalism and the advent of newspapers, but they have not really explored the female characters in the play, and the roles women played during this transitional era of the advent of news media.

Julie Sanders's research supplements that of Wayne and McKenzie's by focusing on what their research lacks. She explores how the emergence of print culture opened a public debate about gender, politics and commodification in the early seventeenth century (183). For Sanders, Jonson's male bias made him believe that only men were entitled to exchange their intellectual labor for capital (184). In her view, *The Staple of News* not only satirizes the commodification of print media but also ridicules the whole political economy that fetishized news as a marketable commodity (187).

While Sanders does examine the role the female protagonist, Pecunia, plays in her own private consumption of news, I find her analysis focuses primarily on the commodification of gender, the politics of the press, and the politics of the more elite private theater (188; 191; 202). Like Sanders, this paper examines Jonson's attitude toward the competition between the commercial theater and the news trade via an analysis of the play's female characters. Unlike Sanders' investigation, however, this essay also explores the early modern theater's circulation of news as a form of social currency and early modern men's circulation of women as a commodity.

Jonson opens his play by pointing out that the news trade's real goal is not to introduce current issues and express public opinions, but to operate as "a place of huge commerce"(1.2.27-28).⁴ Hence, when the Fashioner introduces the news staple to the potential investor, Pennyboy Junior, he uses financial terms to emphasize the staple's commercial value. Then, when Thomas Barber joins in to explain to Pennyboy how the news office operates, they again focus on the fact that news is a lucrative commodity "made" (fabricated) to create a commercial profit:

PENNYBOY JUNIOR. Emissaries? Stay, there's a fine new
word, Tom! Pray God it signify anything.
What are emissaries?

THOMAS. Men employed outward, that are sent abroad to fetch
in the commodity.

FASHIONER. From all regions where the best news are made—

THOMAS. Or vented forth—

FASHIONER. By way of exchange or trade. (1.2.48-52)

As Karen Newman notes in "Engendering the News," Jonson chooses to dub his news office a "staple," with a clear emphasis on "the news as goods" to be circulated (52). Jonson's news staple is literally a storehouse that collects and holds pieces of news as commodities for potential consumers to purchase. The newsmongers at the staple, moreover, are clearly aware of their consumers' social status as well as their ignorance. When the Register of the Staple boasts

⁴ Subsequent quotations of the play are taken from *The Staple of News*, ed. Anthony Parr (New York: Norton, 1988).

to Pennyboy Junior, for example, about the profitability of his news staple, he focuses on the gullibility of the consumers:

'Tis the house of fame, Sir,
Where both the curious, and the negligent;
The scrupulous and careless; wilde, and stay'd;
The idle, and laborious; all doe meet,
To taste the cornucopiae of her rumors,
Which she, the mother of sport, pleaseth to scatter
Among the vulgar; Baites, Sir, for the people!
And they will bite like fishes. (3.2.115-22)

Here, although the consumers are classified into diverse types—"the curious," "the negligent," "the scrupulous," "the careless," "the wild," "the staid," "the idle," and "the laborious"—they are all "vulgar" and "bite" the news "like fish." Jonson portrays his contemporary newspaper readers as ignorant, gullible fools who do not have any ability to make critical judgments and who can be easily deceived by fabricated stories.

However, Jonson's contempt for vulgar newspaper readers is not solely something personal, but a cultural product of his time. In *Governed by Opinion*, Dagmar Freist points out that in early seventeenth-century England, the freedom to comment on political and religious issues was a privilege of the social elite, and commoners' criticism of the latter's conventional opinions was viewed as the main cause of social unrest and disorder. Freist discovered that in the early seventeenth century, people believed the discussion of political and religious affairs by "ordinary men and women . . . threatened the monopoly of secular and divine authority as the sole interpreter of politics." Moreover, this hostility toward the expression of public opinions by commoners was especially intense when these commoners were women, since the British society at that time was ubiquitously patriarchal.

Influenced by the familiar image of women as "scolds," "shrews," and "gossips," the English upper class at that time considered the public opinions of women to be rumors, sensational gossip or false news that threatened the welfare of the nation state (1-7). Indeed, Jonson's contempt for gullible news consumers as expressed in his play is clearly gendered and influenced by his social class. The playwright's stigmatization of his contemporary newspaper readers, especially the women, is clear from the very beginning of the play. In

the Induction, four middle-class women dressed in upper-class attire interrupt the Prologue and invade the stage. These four women, named Gossip Mirth, Gossip Tattle, Gossip Expectation, and Gossip Censure, demand the right to sit on stools customarily reserved for noblemen as they come onstage. Gossip Mirth encourages her friend: “Come gossip, be not ashamed. The play is *The Staple of News*, and you are the mistress and lady of Tattle; let’s ha’ your opinion of it” (Induction 2-4). Gossip Tattle readily takes her cue and warns in the Prologue that instead of “stale” and “fly-blown” news, she expects to hear something “new,” “fresh,” and “untainted” (Induction 25-27).

According to Pamela Allen Brown, the word “gossip” originally referred to “a godparent of either gender,” but in the seventeenth century it meant an obnoxious woman who ran around tattling about neighborhood issues (62).⁵ Jonson’s Gossips appear to be a group of garrulous women unaccompanied by men and, as Stewart Sherman observes, the Gossips’ “loquacity as well as their sobriquets” lay bare their ambition to assert their right to talk (27). In the play, Jonson’s aversion to or even antipathy toward women’s comments on current affairs is clearly marked by the way he stresses that these Gossips are reading and commenting on the latest news without considering its accuracy.⁶ In the Third Intermean, Gossip Tattle tells her female companions: “But whether it were true or not, we gossips are bound to believe it, an’t be once out and afoot. How should we entertain the time else, or find ourselves fashionable discourse for all companies, if we do not credit all and make more of it in the reporting” (37-41). Her words clearly show that she is not only a blind follower of the news, but takes news commentary as a “fashionable discourse” she can use to initiate leisure-time entertainment with her female companions.

⁵ Jane Rickard discovers that “gossip as a term to denote ‘idle talk; trifling or groundless rumour; tittle-tattle’ (*OED*, 4) was not available to Jonson. She points out that Jonson is drawing on the contemporary definition: “A person, mostly woman, of light and trifling character, esp. one who delights in idle talk; a newsmonger, a tattler” (*OED*, 3), but using the term “gossip” in its later sense to denote the “opinionated talk that Jonson’s four gossips epitomize. See Rickard 298 for her discussion of the four gossips (esp. note 12).

⁶ D. F. McKenzie argues that Gossip Mirth is a “dramatic theorist, literary historian, and sharp reviewer” (175). Karen Newman, however, remarks that Jonson represents the Gossips as absurd by letting them consistently misunderstand the moral significance of the fable; by ridiculing their preoccupation with fashion, rank, and personal gossip; and by debasing their judgment of the news (“Engendering” 67-68). I tend to agree with Newman that Jonson intends to portray his female Gossips negatively and that their comments on current affairs are discounted due to their lack of knowledge (their consistent misunderstanding of the moral fable).

The link between the Gossips' consumption of news and the Renaissance gender-specific rules regarding public opinion is significant. These Gossips are portrayed as transgressive middle-class women who appear on the stage in "lady-like" attire (Induction, stage direction). Gossip Mirth claims onstage that she and her female theater-goers are "women of fashion, and come to see and to be seen" (Induction 9-10). When the Prologue expresses resistance to her proposal to let the Gossips sit on the stools customarily reserved for the noblemen, Gossip Mirth proclaims that she and her female friends are in the Blackfriars to "arraign" both the noblemen and their poets (Induction 22). To "arraign" is to "charge" or to "accuse." Jonson's use of "arraign" here makes clear the Gossips' challenging stance toward their social betters and the patriarchal authority.

Their transgression of gender norms, social classes and sumptuary laws is only reinforced by their audacity in commenting on current affairs and demanding to hear news that is to their taste. As Newman notes, in shaping the four Gossips in this way, Jonson wants to ensure that no one in his real audience will share their feminized opinions ("Engendering" 68). I believe that in doing so, the playwright wants to emphasize that the circulation of newspapers among the vulgar, especially among ignorant, gossiping women, is potentially disruptive because the latter lack the ability to make critical judgments, so that their unverified rumors may easily lead to riots and other manifestations of social disorder.

In addition to his four Gossips, Jonson's *Countrywoman* also shows the potential danger of allowing women to read newspapers. Entering the news staple to purchase "a groatsworth of any news," the *Countrywoman* cares "not what" news but, whatever it is, to carry it down this Saturday to her vicar (1.4.11.12). For the *Countrywoman*, news is a hostess's gift, something similar to a bottle of wine or a basket of apples to be delivered as a show of good will. Although the staple is currently short of news, Nathaniel, first clerk of the Staple, promises to "fit" her some news as long as the emissaries (news collectors) of the Royal Exchange or St. Paul "send [it] in" (1.4.15-16). Here, then, to satirize women's poor ability to evaluate or judge current affairs, Jonson connects the professional jargon of journalism with that of the fashion or tailoring industry. The primary operators of the news staple, such as *The Fashioner* and *Thomas*, come indeed from these trades. What's more, the places where the "emissaries" gather and assemble news as a commodity, the

Royal Exchange and St. Paul, are London's centers of fashion and conspicuous consumption.⁷ This intersection between the news trade and the fashion industry enlivens Jonson's image of news consumption as a feminized, luxurious activity similar to the consumption of the most fashionable clothing. News is allegorized as a fashionable outfit that is produced to suit the Countrywoman's vulgar taste. The fact that she does not care what kind of news she is going to purchase only reinforces the belief in women's inability to properly judge the creditability of their informational sources.

Jonson extends his mockery of women's news consumerism with the character of Dopper, a female Anabaptist. Dopper comes to the news staple to get the latest news from Amsterdam. The Register of the Staple asks Thomas to read a piece of news to her to see whether or not she wants to buy it. Dopper, who does not totally understand what she is told and is not even able to supply a judgment or comment about what she has heard, simply asks for another piece of news of a similar "species" (3.2.136). The Register agrees to offer her another piece of news at a greatly inflated price, and Dopper accepts the proposal without even checking out the new news item. Her credulity further enables Jonson to voice his sarcasm with regard to women's purported inability to make accurate political judgments. That is, her blind desire, her hunger for a piece of fancy news clearly shows women's lack of ability to judge current political and religious affairs.

In the play, Jonson further links women's interest in news with conspicuous consumption through his depiction of Pecunia, the female protagonist. Her full name is Aurelia Clara Pecunia which, according to E. B. Partridge, means Golden Bright Money (181). She is the Infanta of the Mines, an heiress with enormous wealth. The names of her four ladies-in-waiting are all derived from legal terms related to real estate or business contracts: Mortgage, Statute, Band (namely Bond), and Wax. Her secretary and gentleman-usher is named Broker, whose name can indicate a middleman, a real estate agent, or even a procurer of female flesh. With her great wealth, Pecunia allegorizes the extent of women's "power of consumption" in the news industry.

⁷ For the development of London as a center of conspicuous consumption, see F. J. Fisher (37-50), Jean E. Howard ("Women, Foreigners" 150-67), Lawrence Stone (249-67), and Ian W. Archer (174-92).

Her interest in the news trade, however, is linked not just to her gender but also to the conspicuous consumption of fancy new products by women as a group. As Cymbal, the master and governor of the Staple, proudly boasts to his colleagues: “She is a woman, /And that so soon as sh’hears of the news office, / She’ll come to visit it, as they all have longings / After new sights and motions” (1.6.58-61). Cymbal’s words reveal that Pecunia’s status as a business investor is not respected because of her gender, and that her interest in news is regarded and interpreted as merely another example of women’s insatiable lust for foreign luxuries, fancy or fanciful products.

For her suitors, Pecunia’s enormous wealth elevates her social status, making her even more desirable and more competitive in the marriage market. Jonson makes this clear to his audiences via the unconventional poetry that Pennyboy Junior employs to praise her beauty:

Yourself, who drink my blood up with your beams
As doth the sun, the sea! Pecunia shines
More in the world than he, and makes it spring
Where’er she flavours. Please her but to show
Her melting wrists or bare her ivory hands,
She catches still! Her smiles, they are love’s fetters!
Her breasts his apples! Her teats strawberries!
Where Cupid, were he present now, would cry,
Farewell my mother’s milk, here’s sweeter nectar! (4.2.48-58)

Anthony Parr notes that Pennyboy’s love poetry, unlike conventional poetry that idealizes the loved one into a “precious inanimate object,” translates Pecunia into “perishable nature” (38). The images of “breasts like apples,” “teats like strawberries” and a “sweeter nectar” than “mother’s milk”, in addition to their self-parodying, comic-absurd aspect, enable Pennyboy (and Jonson) to transform Pecunia into a sexualized commodity that is readily available for male consumption (38).

As Newman’s research shows, early modern English women were seen not only as consumers but as commodities themselves (“City Talk” 183). Their vulnerability to material pursuits was linked to the fact they always could, age and looks permitting, sell their bodies as luxuries of one sort in order to satisfy their material desires (184). Ian W. Archer points out that in the Christian tradition “consumption was a moral problem because the desire

for goods was linked with sexual desire” and sexual desire with disobedience (186). For early modern Englishmen, then, city women’s material desire for luxuries greatly challenged the patriarchal hierarchy. In the play, Pecunia’s dual identity as a consumer and as an object to be consumed illustrates the early modern male prejudice that women were unable to make wise purchasing decisions, as well as men’s anxiety about their own potential desire to “possess” attractive women who would sell their bodies only to satisfy their material desires. Peter Stallybrass claims that in early modern England, women were taken as men’s exclusive possessions and enclosed within their homes so that they could be more easily subjected to patriarchal surveillance and control (126-27).

The early modern commodification of women, and the male anxiety arising from the potential danger that women might sell their bodies to satisfy their purely material desires, can be seen in Pennyboy Senior’s imprisonment of Pecunia in a lockup chamber. In Act 2, scene 1, Pecunia and her ladies-in-waiting are discussing how much air she should take (2.1.45-54). The more conservative Band warns Pecunia that she has already taken too much air (2.1.45), but she asserts her independence by saying it is up to her whether or not to “endure to take a great deal more” and she stays outside (2.1.46-47). Statute thinks that “A little [air] now and then does well,” and keeps her in her complexion (2.1.50), while Mortgage warns: “But too much, madam, may increase cold rheumes, / Nourish catarrhs, green sicknesses and agues, / And put you in consumption” (2.1.50-54). Finally Statute tells her: “’Twill make your grace too cheap / To give them [her suitors] audience presently” (2.1.59).

Later in the play, the audience comes to realize that Pecunia and two of her chambermaids have been “crammed ...up in a closebox / All three together, where [they] saw no sun / In one six-months” (4.3.44-46). To keep Pecunia, this valuable asset, as his private possession, Pennyboy Senior has imprisoned her in a chamber to avoid her public exposure (her circulation among men). Pecunia is aware of his patriarchal control and resists it by showing her ladies-in-waiting that she has the power to decide how much air she should be exposed to—that is, to what degree she should “circulate.” Mortgage thus warns her mistress that over-circulation among men will lead to her consumption and lower her value in the marriage market.

So while it is not surprising that Pecunia is willing to be circulated outside with Pennyboy Junior, “the prodigal’s dispersion of her favors . . .

place[s] her in danger of ‘consumption’” (Deng 255). Newman also notes that Pennyboy Junior, in circulating Pecunia from man to man, is in charge of the “dispensation” of her kisses, and that here we see Jonson himself associating women with the dirtiness and corruption of money (“Engendering” 62). Finally, the play discounts Pecunia’s influence on the news trade while emphasizing her economic value as a marketable commodity. Unable to bear the sight of her kissing tavern-goers, Pennyboy Canter exclaims, “Why, here’s the prodigal [that] prostitutes his mistress!” (4.2.127). Then when Pecunia refuses to leave with her ward, Pennyboy Senior, the latter angrily shouts, “Pecunia is a whore” (4.3.82). Jonson makes it clear here that, for both her suitors and her ward, this is not a woman with the personal agency to control either her own speech or the news trade. If she resists patriarchal possession and speaks her mind, she will surely be deemed a whore.

Thus, basing his opinions on Ian Archer’s assertion that “the desire for goods was linked with sexual desire,” Stephen Deng argues in “Global Economy” that conspicuous consumption was inevitably connected with sexual promiscuity or even prostitution (Archer 186; Deng 253). In *The Staple of News*, Jonson attempts to link women with irrationally conspicuous consumption, making their desire for material luxuries the primary cause of England’s economic deterioration and suggesting that this desire will further enable them to ensnare and disrupt the patriarchal authorities. Jonson thinks that women’s desire to know for the latest and thus most “fashionable” news will have the same disastrous results as their lust for the most fashionable clothing. In early modern England, clothing was a mark of male privilege and was used to distinguish social classes as well as to mark male taste; however, women’s desire to consume, that is, to possess and wear luxurious clothing challenged this customary privilege of men.⁸ By linking women’s power as consumers with their taste for both fashionable clothing and the latest news, Jonson reveals his male bias as well as his fear: female readers of the news will transgress their proper territory as pre-established by the patriarchal power structure.

⁸ For the early modern clothing as a means to “mold and shape” social identities, see Jones and Stallybrass’s *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory*, especially Jones and Stallybrass’s major argument in page 2. For Renaissance clothing as a male privilege to distinguish education and social identity, see Sanders 197.

Ben Jonson feared that the increasing dominance of the news trade might impinge upon the commercial theater's monopoly on the expression of public opinion and on social and political critique. His anxiety about women's power of consumption intersects with his critique of the news media: for Jonson, the latter's accessibility to both sexes and to all classes liquidated traditional gender and class boundaries, thereby threatening the established patriarchal hierarchy and forcing readers to believe the fabricated truths mass-produced by the printers. Viewing the newly-emerging news media as the commercial theater's potential competitor, the playwright responds to this new innovation with the strict and sometimes biased judgments we see in *The Staple of News*. Here he warns his audiences that the news trade is dominated by dishonest newsmongers who may fabricate stories to meet consumer demands rather than report the actual events. By depicting his female characters as blindly credulous news consumers, Jonson not only debases women's taste in their eager consumption of literary and cultural products, but also shows his hostility toward the burgeoning news industry.⁹ However, women's role as news consumers actually reveals the increasing fluidity of gender and class boundaries, and begins to challenge the legitimacy of Jonson's art as a vehicle for expressing truth.

What remains unresolved in this essay is the question as to why the early modern commoners went to the playhouse for news? Why did they not obtain their news from other informational sources, such as current ballads or broadsides and pamphlets? Very likely the playhouses' ability to gather large crowds of people from all walks of life and all social classes contributed greatly to the theater's crucial role in the circulation of news. Paul Yachnin claims in "The House of Fame" that "the theater itself was a center of trade in news in early modern London" (183). Yachnin points out that although not everyone hungry for news would go to the theater, and indeed not everyone went to the theater primarily to know the latest news, "news was an element of the theater's appeal" (189). Yachnin believes the early modern playwrights understood that for lower-class audiences, part of the pleasure of theater-going was to gain inside information about the elite circle from which they

⁹ McKenzie notes that Jonson's resistance to the burgeoning news industry shows his failure to see the potential of an emergent medium that provided more opportunities for ordinary readers to participate in current affairs of the commonwealth (187).

were excluded (203). The early modern dramatists, of course, understood this mentality, and so they learned to use the playgoers' interest in news "to enhance the popularity of their plays and their own public prestige" (198).

Hence, early modern drama not only "appropriated" aristocratic and popular forms of news-making, but also "transformed them into theatrical material," retailing "inside information about court and government affairs" to the theatergoers (183). Jonson is definitely aware of the playgoers' appetite for news, and he uses it wisely and effectively in his plays. As Yachnin observes, *The Staple of News* is a very "newsy" play "with a considerable range" (195). For instance, Jonson incorporates contemporary news figures like Nathaniel Butter and Thomas Gainsford; contemporary actors and dramatists like Thomas Middleton, William Rowley, and Jonson himself; and even contemporary political figures such as Gondamar and Isabella Clara Eugenia, the Infanta of Spain. The play also mocks London's Gresham College, advertises Jonson's favorite taverns (Dunstan and the Phoenix), and allows the four Gossips to discuss the current fashions, news, and celebrities (Yachnin 195). As a professional playwright, Jonson considers his play to be a "timeless and universal study of human nature" which clearly has educational value (Yachnin 195).

For this playwright who believes news to be a form of social currency reserved for the aristocracy and the social elite, the media's circulation of such currency among the vulgar is considered disruptive and potentially dangerous—as is the circulation of upper-class women. Their fascination with news-reading lures women of all classes to come out of their homes, to get beyond the boundaries of patriarchal control, to speak and comment on public issues. Thus the patriarchs (including Jonson) fear the power of the news, the allure and desirability of the news for women like Lady Pecunia, who can themselves decide which taverns they may wish to frequent, and which gallants in those taverns they may wish to engage in conversation. The control of news circulation and the control of women arise out of the same fear—the fear that the established patriarchal power structure and social hierarchy may be challenged and subverted.

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