

Troping Prostitution: Jonson and “The Court Pucell”

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Sometime in 1609, Ben Jonson penned “An Epigram on the Court Pucell,” a satirical poem in which he rails against Cecilia Bulstrode (c.1584-1609), Gentlewoman of the Queen’s Bedchamber and kinswoman and friend of Lucy Harington Russell, the Countess of Bedford. Apparently responding to some critique of his person (“Do’s the Court-Pucell then so censure me” [1]), Jonson proceeds to label Bulstrode a “Pucell.”¹ Not surprisingly, many critics have interpreted the poem as a denunciation of Cecilia as a whore, the word ‘pucell’ constituting an early modern term for a prostitute. Indeed, A. C. Swinburne in 1889 commented upon the “virulent ferocity” of what he identified as the epigram’s “personal attack on a woman.”² He went on to assert: “no man has said coarser (I had well-nigh written, viler) things against the sex to which these exceptionally honoured patronesses belonged.”³

This interpretation of Jonson’s epigram as a slur on Cecilia Bulstrode’s sexual morality seems to have held sway for more than half a century, with C. H. Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson, the Oxford editors of Jonson, echoing the sentiments given voice to by Swinburne: “Certainly few men in his day, or in any day, have assailed a woman with the foul-mouthed ferocity of his lines to ‘The Court Purcell’ ...Jonson impatiently flings aside the dignity of just rebuke...in order to outdo her in ribald abuse.”⁴ In an essay which considered the place of “Epigram on the Court Pucell” among the other poems contained in Jonson’s *The Underwood* (a collection of his verse published posthumously in 1640), Jongsook Lee in 1989 interrogated the “personal” nature of the poet’s attack on Bulstrode as identified by the Oxford editors and Swinburne before them. Lee concluded that: “The charges levelled against Cecilia Bulstrode are too stylized to be taken as personal. In this epigram, she becomes a generic court pucelle, and by that means, an image of the

¹ All parenthesised references provide line numbers to this edition: Ben Jonson, “An Epigram on the Court Pucell” (*The Underwood*, XLIX) in *Ben Jonson: The Poems and the Prose Works*, ed. C. H. Herford, Percy Simpson and Evelyn Simpson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1947), Vol. 8, pp. 222-23. Hereafter this 11-volume edition will be cited as *H&S*.

² Algernon C. Swinburne, *A Study of Ben Jonson* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1889), p. 107.

³ Swinburne, p. 107.

⁴ *H&S*, Vol. 1, pp. 58-59.

false world.”⁵ Though, she does go on to concede that Bulstrode nevertheless functions in Jonson’s epigram as an “exemplary picture of vice.”⁶

Most recently, Robert W. Halli, Jr has decried how “certain incorrect or incomplete readings of Jonson’s ‘Epigram on the Court Pucell’ seem to have become [Bulstrode’s] ‘dram of evil,’ and to have created the appearance of a poisoned character.”⁷ Rather than establishing her sexual immorality, Halli believes that the poem suggests Bulstrode’s “reputation is better than that of the court.”⁸

What appears to have characterised commentators’ analyses of “Epigram on the Court Pucell” to date, then, is an effort to either prove or disprove the existence of a seventeenth-century cultural belief in Bulstrode’s sexual promiscuity. Yet, far from serving as an indicator as to Jonson’s understanding of Cecilia Bulstrode’s un/chastity, the epigram signals in fact the poet’s frustration with the male dependence upon a female courtier that his success at court is in large measure determined by. The poem registers, in other words, Jonson’s unease with a patronage-client system that accommodates an apparent inversion of traditional gender codes.

Whilst the aforementioned critics are at pains either to enchain Bulstrode within or to free her from a construction of whore, I am more concerned here to explore the trope of prostitution that can undoubtedly be seen to pervade “Epigram on the Court Pucell” and to establish its cultural function. For, the poem arguably conveys the sense of Bulstrode as a figurative courtesan as a result of the appropriation by Jonson of a cultural vocabulary that is often applied to the commercial prostitute. To this end, Halli is right to argue in his discussion of the epigram that Jonson is not declaring Cecilia to be a literal whore. But nor is the poet praising her. Rather, he is figuratively projecting whoredom onto the person of Bulstrode through engagement with a trope of prostitution. Significantly, this trope is frequently employed by men of the period in order to reassert their male positions of privilege in moments when they perceive a threatening female independence – a female independence that Jonson clearly believes to be exhibited by the women who perform an influential role in the patronage system of the Jacobean court.

⁵ Jongsook Lee, *Ben Jonson’s Poesis: A Literary Dialectic of Ideal and History* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), p. 14.

⁶ Lee, p. 16.

⁷ Robert W. Halli, Jr, “Cecilia Bulstrode, ‘The Court Pucell’” in *Subjects on the World’s Stage: Essays on British Literature of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, ed. David G. Allen and Robert A. White (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1995), 295-312, pp. 304-05.

⁸ Halli, p. 304.

The key to understanding Jonson's troping of prostitution in "Epigram on the Court Pucell" lies, I believe, in the opening six lines of the poem:

Do's the Court-Pucell then so censure me,
And thinkes I dare not her? let the world see.
What though her Chamber be the very pit
Where fight the prime Cocks of the Game, for wit?
And that as any are strooke, her breath creates
New in their stead, out of the Candidates?

(1-6)

The word "censure" appears to indicate that Jonson considers himself to be the recipient of a personal slight from Bulstrode. The phrase "thinkes I dare not her" is particularly suggestive in that the idea of the poet being "daring" enough to respond to the censure reveals two things to the reader: firstly, it demonstrates an acute awareness on the poet's behalf of the gap between Jonson's and Bulstrode's social standing. And secondly, it exposes revenge, or at the very least retaliation, to be the animating force of the poem. Jonson's indignation at having been critiqued by the female courtier is readily apparent in the scornful and combative tone of the first couplet. He clearly considers his epigram to constitute a poetic act of retribution that has the power to eclipse the personal injury inflicted upon him by Bulstrode's censure. Inviting the "world" to "see," the poem becomes a means for Jonson of publicly staging his disapprobation of the woman who has slighted him; attempting to outdo Cecilia Bulstrode in the art of censure, he transforms his poetry into a theatre of verbal combat.

The precise nature of Bulstrode's censure of Jonson is not known. However, to judge from lines 4-6 of the epigram, the perceived slight was linked to Cecilia's involvement in a literary circle which met at her chambers to play games of "news." The news game entailed sharing and exchanging writings ("news"). There seems to have been a particular structure that the "news" had to adhere to in order to fulfil the rules of the game: "With a few exceptions, the news pieces follow a precise formula, which includes a declarative beginning, a series of nouns clauses, conceited similes and metaphors, and an effective concluding praise."⁹ One of the most prominent players of the game was John Cocke or Cooke, author of "Newes from the lower end

⁹ Halli, p. 297.

of the Table” and whose name Jonson alludes to in line 4 of “Epigram on the Court Pucell” (“Cocks”). Bulstrode herself was the author of a news piece entitled “Newes of my morning Worke.” However, as Halli has pointed out, there is only one line within this composition that could be interpreted as a critique of a creative writer: “That a man with a female wit is the woorst *Hermaphrodite*.”¹⁰ And how this might be relevant to Jonson is not apparent.

Rather than “Newes of my morning Worke” providing the principal cause of Jonson’s upset, I consider to be the more likely source his evident exclusion from the intimate gatherings at Bulstrode’s chamber. While participants in the news game included the male wits Sir Thomas Overbury, Sir Thomas Roe, Sir Benjamin Rudyerd, John Cocke and John Donne (all of whom were friends of Jonson’s), the second couplet of “Epigram on the Court Pucell” appears to imply that Jonson himself was not invited by Bulstrode to take part. The epigram’s focus on the female courtier’s involvement in the news game belies a concern with the power and influence to be gained by Bulstrode from belonging to such a literary circle. Certainly the poet is voicing his resentment at the way Bulstrode in her position as hostess determines who is to be included as “Candidates” or new participants in these literary assemblages.

As the daughter of Edward Bulstrode and Cecilia Croke Bulstrode of Hedgerley Bulstrode, Buckinghamshire, Cecilia Bulstrode was a highborn woman – the families Bulstrode and Croke were of notable rank and importance in the county, as well as of considerable financial substance.¹¹ But it appears to have been Bulstrode’s association with the Countess of Bedford that in particular secured for her the role of a public person at the center of literary gatherings, wielding cultural influence. The Countess occupied a position of unique privilege and power as the recognised favourite of Queen Anna of Denmark. As Barbara Kiefer Lewalski has astutely commented:

as favourite lady-in-waiting to the Queen from her accession in 1603 to her death in 1619, [the Countess of Bedford] influenced the Queen’s patronage

¹⁰ Halli, p. 299; James E. Savage, ed., *The “Conceited Newes” of Sir Thomas Overbury and His Friends* (1616; facsimile reproduction, Gainesville, Fla.: Scholars’ Facsimiles and Reprints, 1968), p. 251.

¹¹ Halli, p. 295. For further biographical information on Bulstrode, see: J. A. Harper, “Ben Jonson and Mrs. Bulstrode,” *Notes and Queries* 28 (1863), p. 150; and, Percy Simpson, “Ben Jonson and Cecilia Bulstrode,” *Times Literary Supplement*, 6 March 1930, p. 187.

directly and had the ear of the King's minister and favourites...In doing so, she claimed a place in the courtiers' power games, and became a force to be reckoned with in the disposition of offices, the arrangement of marriages, and the shaping of Jacobean culture.¹²

In addition to being courted for her "favors" by those seeking advancement at court, Bedford also exercised a considerable amount of authority through her role as literary patron to the major poets of the day (Daniel, Donne, Drayton and Jonson). Exerting a shaping influence on the literature and culture of the Jacobean court, the Countess effectively circumnavigated the restrictions of the traditional gender role proscribed for women - as can be adduced from Samuel Daniel's representation of her in the verse letter accompanying his *A Panegyrike Congratulatory* (1603) as one who managed "T'unlocke that prison of your Sex."¹³

As an intimate friend of the Countess and a member of the Bedford circle, Cecilia Bulstrode had powerful allies at court and was perceived to be a person of consequence. Acting as hostess of the "news" gatherings, moreover, appears to have enhanced further her prestige as a notable cultural presence. Jonson most definitely responds to Bulstrode's censure in a way that signals his concern with the puissance she has gained through coterie association with the wits of the Twickenham circle (so-called due to the Countess' residence at the Twickenham estate when she was not at court). Written, I believe, in response to having been excluded by Bulstrode from the literary games held in her parlour, "Epigram on the Court Pucell" articulates Jonson's exasperation with his identity as a literary client in the patronage system of the Stuart court - an identity founded on the production of a courtly public writing that generally served the purpose of asserting the stability and values of a class on whose margins he lived but from which he was ultimately excluded. Those margins, moreover, were in many ways for Jonson patrolled by a sentry of powerful court women who by exercising their will and influence could effectively permit or deny him access to a successful career as a court writer.

Reeling from the slight of having been excluded from the coterie circle that meets in Bulstrode's chamber, Jonson resorts to locating the female courtier within a

¹² Barbara Kiefer Lewalski, *Writing Women in Jacobean England* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 95.

¹³ Samuel Daniel, "To the Lady Lucie, Countesse of Bedford" in *A Panegyrike Congratulatory Delivered to the Kings Most Excellent Majesty...Also Certaine Epistles. With a Defence of Ryme* (London, 1603) E3v-E4v, sig. E4r.

frame of reference that has the effect of asserting his male supremacy over her. That is, in labelling Bulstrode a pucell, Jonson engages in some verbal wordplay that has the effect of aligning her with prostitution. The original meaning of “pucell” was a “girl, a maid,” but by the early seventeenth century the word had also come to signify a commercial prostitute, as is reflected in the definition provided by the *Oxford English Dictionary* of “A drab, a slut, a courtesan.”¹⁴ Given that the latter usage of the word was the more prevalent at the time Jonson was writing, the epigram’s title readily promotes an identification of Bulstrode with whoredom. Such a reading is supported by the way in which the poem begins by referring to Bulstrode in the third person. (It is not until line 35 that Jonson’s subject is addressed directly). This has the effect of dehumanising Bulstrode and reducing her to the status of an object.

The labelling, then, of Bulstrode as pucell, coupled with the way in which she is talked about in the third person, means that Jonson employs a means of address that is in keeping with the form of language frequently used by men of the period to refer to the common street whore. In appropriating such language and applying it to Bulstrode, Jonson is seen to trope prostitution in an effort to render the female courtier subservient. Troping prostitution is a powerful means of achieving this goal, since it reifies the woman to whom he applies the trope and relegates her to the standing of a courtesan or prostitute, thereby propelling her (at least within the lines of his poetry) on a dramatically downward social trajectory.

Lee connects with this idea when she asserts that Jonson’s “rechristening” of Cecilia Bulstrode as “Court Pucell” means that she “ceases to be an individual woman, but is transformed into an archetypal court pucelle.”¹⁵ Lee, however, also contends that:

If it were not for [William] Drummond’s report that Jonson once read him the “Verses on the Pucelle of the Court Mistriss Boulstred, whose Epitaph Done made,” we would have no way of identifying the “Court Pucell” as Cecilia Bulstrode, and indeed we have none in the epigram, where “she” has no other name than “Court Pucell.”¹⁶

¹⁴ *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., prepared by J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), Vol. 12, p. 786.

¹⁵ Lee, p. 11.

¹⁶ Lee, pp. 14-15.

This is not the case: although Jonson does transform the “She” of the poem into “an archetypal court pucelle,” he does not entirely strip her of identifying marks. Rather, the poet supplies in the word “Pucell” clues for the reader as to her true identity.

From an epitaph that Jonson wrote on the event of Bulstrode’s death later the same year, it is known that the female courtier was sometimes referred to as “Sell Boulstred.”¹⁷ If one takes a closer look at the word “Pucell,” it is possible to divide it into two separate words: “puss” and “Sell”. Just as “pucell” possessed two different meanings in seventeenth-century England, so “puss” could be “Applied to a girl or woman” in a favourable way, or – as was more typical – as “a term of contempt or reproach” with connotations of sexual deviance.¹⁸ In the light of this, the title of Jonson’s epigram describes “the Court puss, ’Sel;” the wordplay of the epigram thus providing a pronounced identity for the woman that the poet is shaming.¹⁹

Further evidence for the wordplay of “Pucell” as directing the reader’s attention to Bulstrode’s identity can be found in Jonson’s play *Epicoene, or the Silent Woman*, thought to have been written around the same time as the epigram and first performed in the winter of 1609-10 at the Whitefriars by the Children of the Queen’s Revels. In this dramatic text, the “collegiate lady” Centaur can be seen to represent Cecilia Bulstrode: “her *nom de Drame* is an anagram: *CE*, the first two letters of Cecilia, combined with *taur*, the beginning of *taurus* or bull for Bulstrode.”²⁰ What is more, Jonson highlights to his audience the importance of the play’s anagram when in a discussion about “the approach of age” with two of her fellow “collegiates,” Centaur poses the question of who will “Make *annagrammes* of our names?”²¹ Perhaps the most salient indicator as to the identity of Bulstrode, though, occurs in *Epicoene* when Captain Tom Otter (alluding to his “chiefe carousing cups,” named after animals) declares to his wife: “JUPITER did turne himselfe into a – *Taurus*, or Bull.”²²

Given that “Epigram on the Court Pucell” was presumably being circulated by Jonson amongst his friends at roughly the same time as *Epicoene* was being performed on stage, it would appear to me that as opposed to effacing her true

¹⁷ *H&S*, Vol. 8, pp. 371-72.

¹⁸ *OED*, Vol. 12, p. 899.

¹⁹ I am hugely indebted to Robert W. Halli, Jr for this reading of the epigram’s title. See Halli, p. 298.

²⁰ Halli, p. 298.

²¹ Ben Jonson, *Epicoene, or the Silent Woman* in “*Volpone*” and *Other Plays*, ed. with an introduction by Lorna Hutson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998), 335-429, IV.iii.36, 42. All references for Jonson’s plays are to this edition.

²² *Epicoene* II.vi.58, III.i.22-23. For further references in the play that correspond to lines from “Epigram on the Court Pucell,” see: *Epicoene* IV.i.53-56 and V.ii.33-34.

identity, Jonson is conversely at pains to ensure that the “she” of his epigram is in fact readily identifiable as Cecilia Bulstrode. Indeed, it is the act of transforming a lady into a generic courtesan that demonstrates his superiority in the art of censure. For, in adopting a language of whoredom (“pucell,” “puss”) to refer to Bulstrode, Jonson posits her within the frame of prostitution and thereby converts her from Gentlewoman of the Stuart court to spectacle of sexual excess.

Contributing to the framing of Cecilia Bulstrode within the practice of prostitution is the epigram’s insistence in lines 5-6 on her open female mouth. Here Jonson not only bemoans how it is Bulstrode’s voice (“breath”) that “creates” new contenders (“Candidates”) for the news game, he simultaneously portrays her as a woman whose mouth opens to every (especially male) interlocutors’ ear. This image of her mouth opening to a series of male wits creates the impression of Bulstrode as a woman who loans the use of her body to a miscellany of men, as one whose body is available to the public for sexual use.

The open female mouth was frequently equated with sexual deviance in the popular literature of the time - one need only think of the gossip, Mistress Allwitt in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1613), who in the course of Thomas Middleton’s play is delivered of her seventh bastard child – and significantly it is a recurring motif in Jonson’s epigram. Consider, for example, the following lines:

What though she talke, and cannot once with them,
 Make State, Religion, Bawdrie, all a theame?
 And as lip-thirstie, in each words expence,
 Doth labour with the Phrase more then the sense?
 (11-14)

Commenting on her linguistic ability to “Make State, Religion, Bawdrie, all a theame,” Jonson forges a connection between Bulstrode’s verbal dexterity and sexual wantonness. The “expence” of her words causing Cecilia to become “lip-thirstie,” Jonson conjures a vision of the Queen’s Gentlewoman of the Bedchamber as a prostitute whose penetrable orifices are thirsty for sexual “labour” (12-14). The picture painted is of a woman who has transgressed on multiple levels: not only does she refuse to adhere to contemporary prohibitions of female speech but she also discourses publicly on matters of “State,” so trespassing into the male preserve of politics.

A further charge levelled against Bulstrode in the above extract is that she attends to the “Phrase more then the sense,” pointing to a discrepancy between word and matter that arises from her pretensions as a wit. Jonson is charging the female courtier with the abuse of language, as in particular is signalled by the contrariness of “Religion” and “Bawdrie” in line 12. Indeed, the bawdry of her language is an accusation that the poet feels the need to return to and reissue later in the epigram: “For bawdry, ’tis her language, and not mine” (26).

The repeated emphasis on Bulstrode’s misuse of language is linked strongly to the literary creations she pens for coterie circulation, as the following lines make clear:

What though with Tribade lust she force a Muse,
 And in an Epicœne fury can write newes
 Equall with that, which for the best newes goes,
 As aërie light, and as like wit as those?
 (7-10)

Here the focus is on Bulstrode’s public voice in the form of her written word, the epigram once again drawing on the contemporary linkage of female speech with sexual unchastity in order to depict her as an unrestrained whore. Jonson additionally seems to suggest that in pursuing a muse she cheapens and corrupts the art of poetic creativity – especially since the product of her “Tribade lust” is the “newes” of a parlour game. Her “epicœn[ity]” as a writer is conceived of as particularly troubling since it effects a number of cultural inversions. In that writing in the early modern period is an essentially masculine activity, Bulstrode by assuming a place amongst the “Twickenham” wits is seen to usurp a male position of privilege. And, in actively pursuing the muse she contravenes the traditional notion of a poet as seized upon by divine inspiration. The “force” and “fury” of Bulstrode’s pursuit results, in fact, in the construction of her as a sexual predator who seeks out the male wits in order to satisfy her desires. This delineation of her rampant sexual energies is reinforced to the reader through the allusion in line 7 to tribadism, thus further helping to sediment Bulstrode within the realms of sexual aberration.

“Epigram on The Court Pucell” continues by asserting that Bulstrode rides to “Church, as others doe to Feasts and Playes,/To shew their Tires” (16-17). Jonson accuses her of misusing “Holy-dayes” as an opportunity “to view, and to be view’d,”

as is to be anticipated from the earlier contrasting of “Religion” with “Bawdrie” (15, 17, 12). Under the appearance of religious fervour, Bulstrode attends church dressed in “Velvet gownes” and “spangled Petticotes brought forth to eye /As new rewards of her old secrecie” (18-20). The poet is evidently pointing to the way in which Bulstrode theatrically displays her body before multiple sets of eyes in much the same way as the figure of the prostitute does. Consequently, her trips to church become moments of spectacle and excess in which the foppery of her dress constitutes an outward symbol of her inner moral depravity. Drawn as a woman who celebrates fine clothing, Bulstrode is revealed by Jonson to be prostituting herself to vanity.

The poet’s reduction of Bulstrode to a spectacle of vanity becomes heightened when he extends further the epigram’s focus on her ostentatious dress:

Farthest I am from the Idolatrie
To stufes and Laces, those my Man can buy.
And trust her I would least, that hath forswore
In Contract twice, what can shee perjure more?
Indeed, her Dressing some man might delight,
Her face there’s none can like by Candle light.
(27-32)

Jonson portrays Cecilia Bulstrode’s idolatry of appearance as being of such proportions that she has ultimately become the very “stufes and Laces” that she worships. In becoming what she wears, her body in turn has come to occupy the status of a commodity to be purchased (“those my Man can buy”). In short, her body is figured as a sexual signifier that conditions her identity as whore, the epigram therefore firmly classifying Bulstrode as a woman engaged in sex commerce.

Jonson’s troping of prostitution is continued in his assertion that despite applying cosmetics to “Her face,” Bulstrode remains unattractive (“there’s none can like by Candle light”). The suggestion is that she is a dissembling and painted whore who employs make-up as a means of trickery and seduction. The reader is informed that it is this dissemblance of appearance that has enabled her “twice” to entrap men in marriage “Contract[s]” which she has later “forswor[n].” What is particularly striking about Jonson’s charge here is the specificity of the word “twice”: Bulstrode, he claims, has committed perjury on two separate occasions.

Commentators have generally interpreted lines 29-30 as a reference to Bulstrode’s alleged love affairs, firstly with Sir John Roe (author of several epigrams in which he declares his devotion to Cecilia) and later with his cousin, Sir Thomas

Roe (a member, as noted earlier, of the Bulstrode “newes” circle).²³ Halli, however, posits that Bulstrode did not actually enjoy a sexually consummated relationship with John Roe, citing extracts from his “An Elegie to Mistress Boulstred: 1602” as evidence.²⁴ He goes on to suggest that the same is true of her relationship with Thomas Roe, this time citing lines 33-34 of “Epigram on the Court Pucell” - “Not he, that should the body have, for Case / To his poore Instrument, now out of grace” - to argue that Jonson is not only attacking “Bulstrode’s breaking a commitment to Roe, but he attacks her virginity.”²⁵ No matter whether she enjoyed a sexual relationship with either of the Roe cousins, what cannot be disputed is that in proclaiming Bulstrode to be a perjurer, Jonson represents her in his epigram as habitually false, fickle and deceptive. Notably this construction of Bulstrode as the embodiment of artifice and dissemblance is one that conforms to contemporary images of the prostitute as a figure of treachery and deception and as learned in the art of performance.

Interestingly, the notion of Bulstrode as role-playing or performing is particularly manifest in the closing lines of the epigram, where Jonson ceases talking about her in the third person and adopts the approach of direct address:

The wits will leave you, if they once perceive
 You cling to Lords, and Lords, if them you leave
 For sermoneeres: of which now one, now other,
 They say you weekly invite with fits o’th’ Mother,
 And practise for a Miracle; take heed
 This Age would lend no faith to *Dorrels* Deed;
 Or if it would, the Court is the worst place,
 Both for the Mothers, and the Babes of grace,
 For there the wicked in the Chaire of scorne,
 Will cal’t a Bastard, when a Prophet’s borne.
(37-46)

Jonson seems to allude here to an illness (the “Mother,” or hysteria) from which Cecilia Bulstrode later died on 4th August 1609, at the age twenty-five. Certainly it is

²³ See, for example: R. C. Bald, *John Donne: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 178; Halli, p. 301; and, John Donne, *The Epithalamions, Anniversaries, and Epicedes*, ed. W. Milgate (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), pp. 182-83n.

²⁴ Halli, p. 296.

²⁵ Halli, p. 301.

the case that in a letter he wrote to Henry Goodyear, John Donne lists the “Mother” as being one of the symptoms of Bulstrode’s last illness:

But (by my troth) I fear earnestly that Mistress Bolstrod will not escape that sicknesse in which she labours at this time. I sent this morning to aske of her passage of this night; and the return is, that she is as I left her yesternight...all accompanied with a Fever, the mother, and an extream ill spleen.²⁶

Despite “the medical establishment insist[ing] on its natural origins,” the Mother was commonly thought to be the result of demonic possession.²⁷ Significantly, in his epigram Jonson refers to John Dorrel, or Darrel (“*Dorrels Deed*”), a Puritan preacher who claimed to be able to cure the sick by practising exorcism. However, in 1599 Darrel had been publicly exposed as a fraud.²⁸ To this end, Jonson’s allusions to the Mother and to Darrel do more than simply connote Bulstrode’s last illness; they work together to vilify Bulstrode by impressing upon the reader the supposition that she is performing the part of a sick woman.

Jonson conjectures, then, that just as Darrel’s patients were never actually unwell (hence his ability to “cure” them), so Bulstrode is not in fact suffering from a sickness. The inference is that Bulstrode “invit[es]” frequent (“weekly”) fits of hysteria – that is, feigns sickness – in order to provide an excuse for summoning preachers and lords to her chamber. That she is luring a restless replacement of men (“now one, now other”) to her room in order to engage in sexual intercourse is made clear to the reader through the inclusion of phrases such as “practise for a Miracle” and “Mothers, and the Babes of grace.” From this the reader is encouraged to surmise that Bulstrode is calling upon the “sermoneeres” to bring about the miracle of a “virgin” birth (“when a Prophet’s borne”). Such a reading gains credence when it is compared to a story Jonson records in his *Conversations with William Drummond of Hawthornden* (1618/19) of a lady who convinces her husband to let her have sexual relations with a preacher to enable “the procreation of an angel or saint” but “which having obtained, it was but an ordinary birth.”²⁹ Depicting Bulstrode as one who

²⁶ John Donne, *Letters to Severall Persons of Honour*, introduction by M. Thomas Hester (1651; reproduction facsimile, Delmar, N.Y. : Scholars’ Facsimiles and Reprints, 1977), pp. 215-16.

²⁷ Halli, p. 302.

²⁸ Barbara Smith, *The Women of Ben Jonson’s Poetry: Female Representations in the Non-Dramatic Verse* (Hants: Scolar Press, 1995), p. 107.

²⁹ Ian Donaldson, ed., *Ben Jonson* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 609.

abuses religion for sexual satisfaction and lures the devout away from God, Jonson once again likens her to the figure of the prostitute as conceived of in the popular imaginary of the day. He portrays her as a dissembling harlot, a woman of sexual misrule set on the path to damnation.

The assiduity with which Jonson employs the trope of prostitution in “Epigram on the Court Pucell” is arresting. The trope runs through the lines of the poem like a red thread, which has the effect of fully divorcing Bulstrode from her position as a court lady and transmuting her into an oversexed whore and a spectacle of moral depravity. Little wonder, then, that Jonson tells Bulstrode to “take heed.” Perhaps most paralyzing, though, is his comment: “Shall I advise thee, *Pucell*? steale away / From Court, while yet thy fame hath some small day” (35-36). At first glance, this appears to constitute a warning to Bulstrode that “if she stays [at court], she is doomed to be alone, disgraced, and if she becomes pregnant, she and her child will suffer,”³⁰ so building on the poem’s evident anticipation of Bulstrode bearing children out of wedlock. Yet, the idea of it being necessary for her to flee the court lest she be publicly misconstrued also strikes me as amounting to a magisterial threat concerning Jonson’s ability to further denigrate Bulstrode through his poetry. In other words, he points to his capacity to publicly damage her reputation in so far as his poetic verses constitute a public and more enduring form of censure.

This emphasis on how poetry can assist him against his adversaries is a concept that Jonson explicitly gives voice to in the Epistle Dedicatory to the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge which he prefixed to the quarto edition of *Volpone* in 1607. Here he says of Poetry:

shee shall out of just rage incite her servants...to spout inke in their faces, that shall eate, farder then their marrow, into their fames; and not *Cinnamus* the barber, with his arte, shall be able to take out the brands, but they shall live and bee read, till the wretches dye, as things worst deserving of themselves in chiefe, and then all of mankind.³¹

Railing about what he perceives to be the contemporary abuses of manners, Jonson figures poetry as a potent force through which he can “brand” his enemies; writing satiric poetry is for Jonson tantamount to “spout[ing] inke” in the faces of his

³⁰ Smith, p. 107.

³¹ *Volpone, or the Foxe* in Hutson, 213-334, pp. 218-19.

adversaries in order to destroy their “fames.” In the case of “Epigram on the Court Pucell” Jonson’s satiric object is branded through the evocation of a sense of whoredom. Adopting a language of prostitution and ascribing to her modes of behaviour that smack of harlotry, Jonson locates Bulstrode within the ambit of prostitution and so presents her to the reader in terms of the degraded social status of a prostitute. Casting Bulstrode in the role of sexually licentious harlot and assuming for himself the position of moral spokesperson in turn enables Jonson to self-magnify his own authority.

Ironically, the epigram seems to have done Jonson himself more harm than Bulstrode. For, he later claimed that the epigram was “stollen out of his pocket by a gentleman who drank him drousie & given Mistress Bulstraid, which brought him great displeasur.”³² As Halli notes, although this could be interpreted as meaning that the incident displeased Jonson himself, it is much more likely to indicate that it procured him the “displeasur” of others – Bulstrode for one, and most probably the members of her circle, including the Countess of Bedford.³³

Perhaps it is no coincidence, then, that in an epitaph that he composed following her death and burial at the Twickenham estate, Jonson declares Bulstrode to have been “first, a Virgin; and then, one / That durst be that in Court: a vertu’ alone.”³⁴ Praising Cecilia Bulstrode for the “vertu” of keeping her virginity even at court, Jonson transforms the “Pucell” of his epigram into a “Virgin” in an apparent effort to redeem himself for his earlier satirical attack. Especially telling, though, is the letter to George Garrard that accompanies the “Epitaph,” in which Jonson asserts: “Would God, I had seene her before that some yt live might have corrected some preiudices they have had iniuriously of mee.”³⁵ Jonson is clearly expressing his regret at not having had a chance to “correct” before her death the “preiudices” that Bulstrode received from him. But of particular interest here is his concern with “some yt live,” which appears to support a reading of Jonson as rousing the discontent of the Bedford circle as a result of his attack on the Countess’ friend in “Epigram on the Court Pucell.”

The discord with Cecilia Bulstrode seems to have caused Jonson quite some embarrassment and to have put at risk his relationship with Lady Bedford, his chief

³² *H&S*, Vol. 1, p. 150.

³³ Halli, p. 311 n44.

³⁴ *H&S*, Vol. 8, p. 371-72.

³⁵ *H&S*, Vol. 8, p. 372.

patroness. The episode can also be seen to reveal in Jonson a resentment of his dependence upon elite ladies of the court. Indeed, the passion and intensity with which he shackles Bulstrode to the classification of whore in “Epigram on the Court Pucell” betrays in fact his own insecurities so that Jonson the literary servant becomes, as Ian Donaldson argues, “passionately, indignantly visible” in the center of his poetry.³⁶ The epigram clearly represents an exercise of male power over a strong independent woman by whom the author feels threatened. As Sir John Harington, writing in the early seventeenth century, declared of court ladies: “All pennis, all prayzers ar on them dependent.”³⁷

Writing Bulstrode as whore does more than grant Jonson the judicial satisfaction of repaying her censure; it provides a means for him of venting his frustrations with the difficulties of patron-client relationships and in particular the strains of subservience to powerful court women - women who, in the words of *Epicoene*'s Morose, “may censure *poets*, and authors, and stiles, and compare ‘hem, Daniel with Spenser, Jonson with the tother youth...”³⁸ Situating Bulstrode's identity on the axis of the sexual constitutes a compensatory act for his vulnerability to her; in an effort to preserve his male sense of self, Jonson pushes Bulstrode into a subaltern position by projecting onto her the degradation concomitant with whoredom. Engagement with the trope of prostitution enables, therefore, the poet to displace onto the body of Bulstrode his anger with the undesirable implications of official patronage: the pandering of creative writers to female courtiers. To this end, Jonson's troping of prostitution comes to signal the dispelling of phallogentric anxieties as ignited by the flaws of a patronage system in which the position of patron is a troublingly gender-neutral one.

³⁶ Ian Donaldson, “Jonson and Anger” in *English Satire and the Satiric Tradition*, ed. Claude Rawson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), 56-71, p. 68.

³⁷ Sir John Harington, Epigram 355 in *The Letters and Epigrams of Sir John Harington*, ed. Norman Egbert McClure (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1930), pp. 291-92.

³⁸ *Epicoene* 2.2.116-19.