

# Self-Reflexivity through Self-Reflectivity: The Play of Metatheatre in Jonson's Comedies

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## Abstract

Metatheatricality, or self-reflexivity, refers to the practice of exposing theatre as the subterfuge that it is, in all its insincerities and falsities. Although recognized as a popular theatrical paradigm only in the mid-twentieth century, practices of a distinctly self-reflexive nature percolated the works of a number of dramatists and poets since the early Elizabethan period. This paper attempts to explore the play of such metatheatrical devices in the works of one such Elizabethan poet, Ben Jonson, who showed unparalleled propinquity to this practice of disillusionment among his contemporaries. I shall adopt three of his comedies, *The Alchemist*, *Bartholomew Fair*, and *The Magnetic Lady*, for study and analysis in this paper and attempt to plot the nature of the dramatist-spectator relationship in the Elizabethan period, and delineate the poetics of lying that are integral to the play of metatheatricality.

[**Keywords:** Metatheatricality, self-reflexivity, Jonson, *The Alchemist*, *Bartholomew Fair*, *The Magnetic Lady*]

## Metatheatre: Disrupting the Chimera of Reality

One did not need Tom Stoppard to write *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, a metatheatrical work subverting its antecedent *Hamlet* to an embedded, auxiliary plot, a play-within-a-play, to throw light on the abounding self-reflexivity of its parent play. Nor did one need a Pirandello orchestrating the search of an author who could construct a plot to contain six already theatricalised characters, to comprehend the modulations of metatheatre. Although unrecognized as a theatrical concept at that time, inflections of a distinctly self-reflexive nature surfaced undeterred in the works of playwrights as early as the Elizabethan period. In the shadows of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, "that towering figure of Western metatheatre" (Abel 77), and his institutional idiom of "All the world's a stage", there were a number of playwrights experimenting with an assortment of devices that underscored the theatricality of theatre, the most prominent among them being Ben Jonson. Jonson, unlike those that "beget *Tales*, *Tempests*, and such drolleries", being "loath to make nature afraid in his plays" (Jonson, *Bartholomew Fair* 552), presents his works as interesting, self-reflective examples when viewed through a metatheatrical lens.

Metatheatre, as a paradigm instituted by Lionel Abel in the mid-twentieth century, is a dramatic device that attempts to expose theatre as the subterfuge it is, with all its insincerities, pretensions and intrinsic 'theatricality'. It disrupts any illusion of reality that the dramatic action on stage might perpetrate and reinforces the artifice and fiction of the play. Abel presents a coherent construction of the concept of metatheatre in his attempts to justify and comprehend the early-modern and modern dramatists' inability to produce a successful tragedy, as understood in its Aristotelian sense of the word. He ascribes these incessant failures on the part of the dramatists to a facet of psychological conditioning percolating and provoking the cerebral constitution of these dramatists and their protagonists alike – their self-consciousness. He argues that, "Lack of self-consciousness is as characteristic of Antigone, Oedipus, and Orestes, as self-consciousness is characteristic of Hamlet..." (Abel 77). Thus, he acclaims metatheatre as a crucial device in the delineation of these self-conscious characters, who are unreservedly aware of their seminal function in determining the nature of events in the play.

However, the plays in question in this essay were explicitly branded by Jonson as comedies. Abel's conception of metatheatre, although stemming from an apparent lack of satisfaction in theatre's aspiration for tragedy, does not preclude other genres of performance in its ambit. He argues that "events in comedy are reduced by humour to examples for reflection and are not irrevocable, as in tragedy. Nor do characters in comedy have to convince us they exist; all they have to do is to make us laugh. Humour, I suppose, consecrates nonexistence" (Abel 58). Furthermore, the staging conditions of the early-modern era in themselves demanded strong mental renditions of the implied fictional settings from its audiences, rendering any prospect of an illusion of reality an improbable manifestation. The day-light performances, the unadorned stages and boy-players acting the female parts, all cumulatively ensured that "the perceptual gap between the fictional and the actual is wide and inescapable" (Stephenson 138). Despite the seemingly flimsy built of the theatrical ruse of reality in comedies, particularly more so in the early-modern period, Jonson's plays are replete with metatheatrical devices.

It can be easily deduced that the incorporation of metatheatrical devices in Jonsonian plays burgeon from fairly different stimuli, rather than any particular need for an alienation effect. These underlying motivations can possibly be best explicated by taking into account Abel's postulation of the two concepts identifying a metaplay – "the world is a stage, life is a dream" (83). Jonson, in his plays, strives to engineer a microcosm of his immediate society and paint its social, economic and political structures in all their "enormities" and "humours" on the stage. For Jonson, the world was a stage with its repertoire of characters inundating his dramatic creativity and imagination, where the characters exist "not simply because they are caught by the playwright in dramatic postures as a camera might catch them, but because they themselves knew they were dramatic before

the playwright took note of them" (Abel 60). Over the course of this essay, I will attempt to extract some of the intertwined metatheatrical devices in three Jonsonian comedies – *The Alchemist*, *Bartholomew Fair* and *The Magnetic Lady* – and assess their functionality in the context of their communal resonances.

### The Alchemist

The inductions to Ben Jonson's plays open the action of the stage to the audience by first disrupting any pre-emptive, superfluous notions of realism that might have been administered unwittingly. They are invariably a direct address to the audience or a dramatized prologue incorporating the audience, a breaking of the fourth wall that in itself dissolves the chimera of realism by facilitating an interaction between the fictional world of the stage and the real world of the spectators. A scrutiny of the dramatic structures of most Jonsonian plays throws light on an innate paradoxical characteristic – the plays begin even before the playing begins. Jonson, at the beginning of every play, essentially (though metaphorically) invites his audience beyond the thresholds of the stage, to glimpse at the dressing rooms behind the fixed backdrop with its closed doors, to watch the actors – real men of flesh and blood – prepare for an afternoon's charade of fiction and imagination, and most importantly, to establish a consensual framework for audience perception, reception and judgment of his play. As Richard Cave succinctly puts it,

"Jonson's initial tactic is frequently to remind an audience precisely where it is and why: looking at a stage where certain gifted individuals are cleverly transforming themselves with our connivance in order to execute a work of imaginative artifice that he has troubled to devise" (2).

The prologue to *The Alchemist*, unlike most of Jonson's other plays, does not consist of an induction nor is it dramatized. However, that does not particularly render it ineffectual when viewed from a metatheatrical standpoint. For instance, the prologue says,

Fortune, that favours fools, these two short hours  
 We wish away, both for your sakes and ours,  
 Judging spectators, and desire in place  
 To th' author justice, to ourselves but grace.  
 Our scene is London, 'cause we would make known  
 No country's mirth is better than our own.  
 No clime breeds better matter for your whore,  
 Bawd, squire, imposter, many persons more.  
 Whose manners, now call'd humours, feed the stage,  
 And which have still been subject to the rage  
 Or spleen of comic writers... (Jonson, *The Alchemist*)

This prologue is evidently a message from “th’ author”, Jonson, and the players (“ourselves”) which is delivered on their behalf by an actor. It is an overt attempt at establishing a consensual middle-ground, when the actor demands of its audience a just conscience, a fair judgement, and a provisional suspension of their faith in Fortune for the next “two short hours”, the duration of the play. But more importantly, it unequivocally establishes that the audience are here to watch a play, a work of fiction, a figment of Jonson’s imagination that would last for two hours.

It is even more interesting to analyse the metatheatrical device of “All the world’s a stage” in action in the prologue. Jonson’s declaration about London as his source and setting for the play reverberates with the credence of Abel’s discourse on metatheatre. Abel asserts that, “none of us, no matter what our situation, really knows the form of the plot he is in” (58). Jonson perceives the streets of London, with their almost Gotham-like darkness, surfeit with the “vices that she breeds above their cure” as his stage, swarming with already dramatized whores, bawds, imposters, and many persons more, all oblivious to the nature of the plot they are in. He merely transports these theatricalised citizens of London from the suburbs and alleyways to the spatiality of the stage and institutes them within the scaffolding of a plot of his imaginary construct. Nevertheless, one can also say that there does flow a very farcical undercurrent, however infinitesimal, in the *dramatis personae* of *The Alchemist*. Cave states that, “There is one dramatic genre – farce – that actually makes the willing suspension of disbelief its subject; it becomes the characters whole mode of being, the longing that their condition in time should be transcendently different” (76). The farcical touch to the characters, particularly those of Druggier, Dapper, Mammon, Kastril, and the Anabaptists, serves to expose the frailties of their human conditions, their insatiable desire for a discernible transcendence of their social, economical, spiritual, or political positions. All this through the dubious science of alchemy! As Cave argues, a pinch of the farcical juxtaposed with the “all-too-insistent reality” that defines the inflections of these London-based characters, impels the audience to what Coleridge identified as ‘the willing suspension of disbelief’. In a play like *The Alchemist*, Jonson believed that “he could rely on the audience recognizing all the types while not actually identifying themselves personally with the reflections they saw on the stage’s mirror” (Gurr, *Who is Lovewit? What is he?* 12)

Abel says that, “In the metaplay there will always be a fantastic element. For in this kind of play fantasy is essential, it is what one finds at the heart of reality” (79). While the very title of the play, *The Alchemist*, a person who turns base metals into gold, portends events of fantastical or perhaps even extraterrestrial nature, the dramatic action of the play, ostensibly grounded in the framework of the worldly, proves otherwise. Despite the questionable nature of alchemy as a scientific bailiwick, it serves as an apt metaphorical model to depict the individual transformations of the characters within the play, or their aspirations in that regard. Jonson had no qualms whatsoever about the questionable nature of

alchemy. He was outright in his denunciation of the science in his epigram titled *The Alchymists*, in which he says, "If all you boast of your great art be true;/Sure, willing poverty lives most in you". In 1616, he even devised a masque titled *Mercury Vindicated from the Alchemists at Court*, where he used alchemy to "express that deplorable flight from Nature which Jonson thought he saw in the literature and society of his time". In the play, alchemy was "put down and its practitioners contemptuously swept away by the harmonious dance of the creatures of the sun" (Barton 136). Thus, Jonson never attempted to instate alchemy as the central, fantastical, extraordinary dimension of his play. Even the rich alchemical jargon, contrary to bolstering any notions of authenticity, emphasizes the instinctive deception and pretence of the art. The real fantasy in the play is not alchemy. It is the characters' inexorable faith in an obscure, occult science for the advancement of their status quo in society that is truly fantastical. The metatheatricality stems from the fact that they never stop believing in the alchemical charade of Subtle and Face, despite its limits being continually and dangerously stretched.

The classic metatheatrical device of a play-within-a-play can also be observed in *The Alchemist*, to the extent that it almost dominates and supersedes its parent play. The construct of a play-within-a-play serves the alienation implied by metatheatre by formulating a microcosm of the theatre on the stage and calibrating audience perception and estimation of the performance through the staged reactions of the characters. It buttresses the notion of spectatorship to a fictive event by emphasizing the fabricated and illusory nature of theatre. The characters on stage, through their rehearsed and enacted responses to the play-within-the-play, attempt to serve as models that the audience is expected to emulate. One of the distinctive qualities of certain Jonsonian characters is their surprising adroitness at utter and complete transformation of the selves through disguise. The characters assume new titles, new clothes, new demeanours, new languages, new voices, new idioms – the donning of new clothes makes them altogether new human beings. Barton, highlighting the essential philosophy of *The Alchemist*, says that, "Fundamentally, *The Alchemist* is a play about transformation, as it affects not metals, but human beings" (137). Jonson goes a step further in his metaphor of transformation by literalising it through the many character renovations of Face, and to some extent those of Dol and Surly. Many times in the play, Face passes off unrecognized by a character that is familiar and has been dealing with his personification of Lungs. Also, he, as Jeremy, the butler, is presumed to have been missing for weeks by his neighbours. We are witness to each of the performances of his varied personalities and watch him prepare, "get into character" and enact a new role. Each episode of his transformation in collaboration with a particular character assumes the quality of a play-within-a-play.

The world of deception, delusion and depiction created by Subtle, Face and Dol in itself serves as a metaphor for the business of play-going, particularly the functioning of the Blackfriars. He equates the swindling practices of the

triumvirate in *The Alchemist* to the daily traffic of play-goers outside the Blackfriars, who gladly lightened their pockets for an afternoon of lies and illusions. The play assumes the shape of a didactic homily in self-reflexivity by highlighting the single, uniform stream of chronic gullibility in the downfall of its characters – their belief and blind faith in the travesties executed by Subtle, Face and Dol, who collectively symbolise the profession of stage acting. Jonson, through his characters, warns his audience against the ramifications of such a misplaced trust in the vocationally pretentious players. Further implications include his merging of “the actual tiring-house... with Subtle’s fictional laboratory... The on/offstage conversation in 2.3, heightens out desire to go backstage, to see how the magic works, a desire that (as always in theatres) is denied us, a denial that sharpens both its mysteries and our imagination” (White, unpublished). The character of Lovewit, with his haunting absence throughout the play and as sole beneficiary of the spoils of the afternoon at the end, is representative of the theatre shareholders. As Gurr cogently argues, Lovewit could very well be a direct reference to William Shakespeare, then a major stakeholder at the Blackfriars, who, like Lovewit, was spending a great deal of time away from London, but benefitting nonetheless from the business of the playhouse (). The horde of visitors and coaches that thronged Lovewit’s house during his absence, as described to him by his neighbours on his return, also reverberates with an immediate, local significance. The wealthy community of Blackfriars had, in 1596, appealed against the establishment of the playhouse on the grounds of ‘the great resort and gathering together of all manner of vagrant and lewd persons’, and in 1609, there was a complaint of ‘daily such resort of people, and such multitudes of coaches . . . that sometimes all our streets cannot contain them’ (Smallwood). The metaphor, and the metatheatricality, is made complete with Lovewit’s lines in the final act,

Here I find  
 The empty walls, worse than I left ’em, smoked,  
 A few cracked pots and glasses, and a furnace,  
 The ceiling filled with poesies of the candle,  
 And ‘Madam with a Dildo’ writ o’ the walls. (Jonson, *The Alchemist*)

These words utterly and comprehensively annihilate the elaborate imagery of the room of alchemy behind the door that was constructed by Face and Subtle merely through a deluge of words and obscure alchemical argot. It breaks the bubble of illusion in which the characters/audiences were ensconced, chastising them for their gullible assumption of reality and blind faith in the artifice of the cozeners/players.

### **Batholomew Fair**

The induction on the stage in *Bartholomew Fair* is a literal manifestation of the covenant which Jonson usually seeks to establish with his audience at the beginning of most of his plays. He first introduces his audience to three company

'persons', the stage-keeper, the book-holder and the scrivener. I refer to them as 'persons' and not characters, because that's how Jonson wants us to receive them. There is, to a certain degree, selectivity in the play of metatheatre in Jonson's works. While Jonson, through his inductions, demands a metatheatrical detachment, a willing suspension of disbelief, from his audience throughout the duration of the play, he asks for something quite opposite during the inductions themselves. He asks us to believe in them. He wants us to take the scrivener seriously, to believe that he truly exists and is not merely a figment of the playwright's imagination, and to enter into a contract with the playwright through him, in full cognizance of his reality. It is not just the persons, but he demands faith in their exchanges as well. The scrivener's postulation of the terms of agreement is not something Jonson wants his audience to disregard or take lightly. Thus, while Jonson staunchly emphasizes the illusion of reality prevalent in the dramatic action of the play, it was only natural for him to perpetrate a sense of veracity in his inductions that essentially serve to establish that very illusive nature of the play to his audience. In other words, since Jonson's plays are prolifically metatheatrical, his inductions in themselves, the devices employed in the pronouncement of that metatheatricity, are far from it. They demand and denote metatheatrical objectivity by assuming a visage of apparent reality.

Quite often, Jonson, in his inductions, employs the clever stratagem of self-deprecation for personal advancement. He, through a character, voices out the possible criticisms to his play, institutes them for appraisal on stage, dissects them, and decries them through a gradual process of derision with a diatribe of rationality, thus consequently depriving his audience of those criticisms by rendering them unoriginal, misplaced, or even absurd. Jonson begins the induction of *Bartholomew Fair* with the stage-keeper's monologue that seems, at the outset, to merely denounce the play. He complains about the lack of jugglers, clever apes, or any promiscuous elements in the play. He grumbles about the inadequacy of farcical, senseless, and wanton humour. Jonson presents the stage-keeper as a representative of the blinkered, unreasonable, spectacle-seeking audience members and with a pinch of exaggeration, ridicules them. His deprecatory rant only advertises Jonson's notions about the merit and superiority of his work.

Like *The Alchemist*, Jonson wrote *Bartholomew Fair* as a commentary on the commerce of theatre. One can see innumerable references paralleling the *Bartholomew Fair* depicted in the play to the theatres and the profession of acting. Jonson had scripted the play for the newly constructed Hope Theatre, erected on Bankside by Henslowe and Alleyn. The establishment was designed to double as a theatre and a bull- and bear-baiting pit. Due to this dual-functionality of the Hope theatre, the stage and the tiring house had to be temporary structures that could be removed on alternate days for animal baiting entertainments (Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage, 1574 - 1642*). The fair, as an annual congruence of persons of various vocations with their temporary structures installed in the churchyard of St. Bartholomew Hospital in Smithfield, serves as an allegory for the Hope theatre, with

its impermanent stage and tiring house. The practice of bear-baiting finds a strong reference in the character of Ursula, or the 'she-bear'. "The baiting associated with Ursula's booth... shares space with the puppet show at the fair, just as bear-baiting coexists with theatrical playing at the Hope" (Ostovich). Bartholomew Fair, an annual event in West Smithfield between 1120 and 1855, had evolved by the seventeenth century to be notorious for its tradition of swindling and pick-pocketing. As Ostovich notes, the celebratory event of St. Bartholomew's day in the play parallels the festive occasion of the play's first performance on Halloween, "with its tradition of trickstering, treating, and disguising" (538). The analogy is made explicit in the induction itself, when the scrivener, referring to the stage, says, that it is "as dirty as Smithfield and as stinking every whit". Furthermore, Jonson, through the play, attempts to point out that both the fair and the theatres had come to be associated with such 'enormities' as pick-pocketing and prostitution. The self-reflexivity of such an analogy functions at two levels. First, the strong social resonances shed light on Jonson's imposition of a plot of his imagination on already theatricalised characters from real life. This is corroborated by the fact that Jonson pays commendable attention to the nuances of daily life at the fair, making note of and precisely delineating the underlying mechanics and the 'humours' and 'enormities' of its people. Second, like *The Alchemist*, *Bartholomew Fair* also deals with the consequences of misplaced trust in cozeners. With its metaphor for theatre, Jonson demands of his audience, an intense self-provocation of the individual consciousness governing their treatment of his play. It is self-reflective as it is self-reflexive.

Jonson experiments with the device of a play-within-a-play in all its forms in many of his works, but we observe its most direct, normative usage in *Bartholomew Fair*. He presents us with a boisterous, bawdy, and farcical version of Marlowe's epic *Hero and Leander*, transposing the action to a Thames-side tavern. And he does that using puppets. Cave argues that,

"The small stature of the puppet-performers (compensated for by their extravagantly vigorous activity) allows us to watch both the play-within-the-play and the groups of on-stage spectators with ease and rapt attention. Once again we have been placed by Jonson in a position where we can watch and judge the effect of performance: as an audience we are required to study an audience" (95)

The plot of *Hero and Leander* as presented by Littlewit in the play resembles closely the travails and ordeals that the characters were subjected to through the course of the day. Thus, it serves as a timeless microcosm of the play, *Bartholomew Fair*, which in itself is a reflection of the London life and its theatres. As Cave points out, Hero, who is about to offer herself to a man whose naked legs excited her into making "a sheep's eye and a half" at him (Jonson, *Bartholomew Fair*), is watched by Grace Wellborn, who had just promised her hand in marriage to Winwife after a mere two hours of acquaintance. The arrival of Kind Dionysus on the scene, transformed into a scrivener, to administer order and justice is paralleled by Justice



Overdo who, guised in the habit of a porter, awaits for the ideal moment to reveal himself and expose and censure the 'enormities' of the other characters (Cave). Jonson presents us with the puppet show precisely at a juncture in the play when the audience might be inclined to judge the characters on stage, to bask in its assumed moral superiority to them. Through Busy's allusion to and misinterpretation of Christian doctrines in his invective, Jonson warns the audience against indulging in smug condescension towards the characters, lest they, as critics stand guilty of greater transgressions. Through the establishment of a diorama of the play for evaluation and a paradigm of reception for emulation in the puppet scene, Jonson "simultaneously entertain[s] while inviting us to explore our laughter and probe deeply into the psychology of performance and audience-response" (Cave 98). This self-reflectivity, along with the overt metaphors for the artifice of playacting, creates a kind of self-reflexivity that is unparalleled in any of his works.

### The Magnetic Lady

Recognizing the aesthetic quality in Compass's lyrical representation of Parson Palate in *The Magnetic Lady*, Ironside asks, "Who made this epigram, you?" to which Compass replies, "No, a great clerk / As any is of his bulk, Ben Jonson, made it" (Jonson, *The Magnetic Lady*). This is followed by other poetic renditions of the characters of Doctor Rut, Practice and Bias. Jonson's works are replete with such self-referential elements. They range from self-characterization, like Asper in *Every Man Out his Humour*, to direct allusions to himself as the architect of the play in progress, as is seen in many of his inductions. Such tactics incorporating the self in the plays proclaim self-reflexivity in their attempts to highlight the fiction of the stage.

*The Magnetic Lady*, first staged in 1632 at the Blackfriars, was the last completed play by Jonson. One of his contemporaries had remarked in a letter dated 16 September, 1632, "Ben Jonson, (who, I thought, had been dead), has written a play against next term called the Magnetic Lady" (Harp). In 1628, at the age of fifty-six, Jonson had suffered a paralytic stroke that had rendered him an invalid and effectively confined him to solitude in his Westminster lodgings. Jonson was, at that time, acutely aware of his proximity to death and there appears to have been, in his plays, distinctive attempts at reconciliation and amelioration of past frictions. Even his critical treatment of his audience that was prevalent in his earlier plays was reduced to a much mellow strain, though not completely negated. Jonson desired for "judicious spectators", who "shall know a good play when they hear it; and will have the conscience and ingenuity to confess it" (Jonson, *The Magnetic Lady* 483, 481). Jonson, owing to his declining physical wellbeing, was conscious of his imminent absence during the performance at Blackfriars. In this light, it is interesting to study the metatheatrical device employed by Jonson that engineered his subtle, spiritual presence in the play, despite his physical absence.

This device is put into action at the very beginning of the induction when the boy of the house, referring to the playwright, says, “Sir, he is not here. But, I have the dominion of the shop, for this time, under him, and can show you all the variety the stage will afford for the present” (Jonson, *The Magnetic Lady* 480). Jonson makes explicit his absence on the occasion and employs the boy, John Trygust, as his delegate to the audience, vocalizing his presence through him. The boy, over the course of the play, methodically dissects all criticisms levelled against the play by Damplay and presents himself, with his acute self-consciousness, astute judgement, and creditable aptitude at rhetoric, as a vocal manifestation of the playwright himself. Both, the boy and Master Probee “associate meaning with intention and condemn any attempt to interfere with orderly unfolding of the poet’s art” (Rowe 440). Damplay, on the other hand, constantly asserts that “meaning is pre-eminently the property and creation of the reader or the spectator, not of the author” (Rowe 440). This conflict of ideologies between the two dissenting parties that forms the backdrop of the play is an echo of the author-audience tension exemplified by Jonson in many of his works.

Jonson surpasses himself in the extent of self-referential allusions in *The Magnetic Lady*. At the time he wrote the play, he was obviously distraught at the lukewarm reception of *The Staple of News* in 1626 and the failure of *The New Inn* in 1629 to please the audience. He seriously feared the loss of his career. Furthermore, Jonson’s life in his final years was far from comfortable. He was surviving on small stipends from the King’s Treasury (for which he occasionally had to beg) and the City of London. His salary as the City Chronologer was terminated in 1631, but was later restored by King Charles, who also saw to the increase of his royal pension. Despite this, he was in a state of constant financial crisis that added to the troubles of his degrading health (Van Den Berg). In a letter to William Cavendish, Earl of Newcastle, dated 1631, Jonson writes,

“I am not so impudent to borrow any sum of your Lordship, for I have no faculty to pay: but my needs are such, and so urging, as I do beg, what your bounty can give me, in the name of good letters, and the bond of an ever-grateful and acknowledging servant.” (Van Den Berg)

The letter shows a man completely unlike the moral, intellectual, and proud Jonson of his prime, a mere fading shadow of his past self. In light of the widening dissent in his relations with his audience and patrons, Jonson was particularly troubled about the continuance of his legacy – his art. This evinces as a constant binding thread in *The Magnetic Lady*, chiefly in his introduction of a self-reflexive shadow of himself looming over the play. As is prominent in the boy’s reference to Jonson’s other works as *Every Man in his Humour*, *Every Man Out of his Humour* and *The New Inn*, he was not only asserting his ownership over the current play, but was also attempting to prevent subversion of his previous works into obscurity. Thus, the metatheatricity of self-referencing assumes unprecedented proportions in *The Magnetic Lady*, as Jonson constantly draws the audience’s attention to the fact

that they are watching a play of his creative construction and that he had entertained them with many a fine comedies in the past.

### Self-Reflexivity through Self-Reflectivity

Jonson was probably the most self-conscious among his contemporaries, a citizen of high moral and intellectual standing demanding recognition of his prowess as a playwright and a poet. This is best reflected in his epigram “To the Learned Critick”,

May others fear, fly, and traduce thy Name,  
As guilty Men do Magistrates: glad I,  
That wish my Poems a legitimate Fame,  
Charge them, for Crown, to thy sole censure hye.  
And, but a sprig of Bayes given by thee,  
Shall out-live Garlands, stoln from the chast Tree.

(Jonson, *The Holloway Pages: Ben Jonson: Works (1692 Folio): Epigrams*)

Jonson’s career as a playwright was a constant negotiation of the vacillations of theatre that was embroiled in political, theological, and cultural disarray in the early-modern period. For him, metatheatricality was not merely an alienation device, but an instrument employed not only to demand an objective treatment of his plays from the audience and exact a rational verdict from the critics, but also to provoke a self-reflective rumination on the nature of our role as the audience.

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