Of Mountebanks, Lovers and Thieves:
Rhetoric and Desire under Two Venetian Balconies

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Whenever Shakespeare and Jonson are mentioned under the same breath, it is likely that they are about to be construed as mutually defining opposites. At its historically most characteristic, this construction made Jonson the supposed lumbering and resentful counterpart to Shakespeare’s supposed effortless and soaring talents – or rather, “the bricklayer of Westminster” vs the “swan of Avon”, a literary-historical commonplace for which Jonson ironically gave a decisive contribution with his prefatory poems to Shakespeare’s First Folio, in which he coined the latter epithet. The Shakespeare vs Jonson topos has generated the counter-commonplace of exploding the binarism, more often than not by reading Jonson against the grain, and especially by reading into him traits that have at different points in critical history loomed large in Shakespeare’s own critical attractions. Instances of this reaction to the Shakespeare vs Jonson topos have ranged from Anne Barton’s argument (in her 1984 monograph on Jonson) for valuing the romance dimension in Jonson’s later writing (despite his famous dismissal of “mouldy tales and tempests”) to millennial pleas for acknowledging the disorderly and subversive in Jonson (very much against his self-proclaimed classicising decorum) and bringing in rather “a new Jonson [...] who is alert to the socio-political contingencies of his age(s)”, “a pluralist Jonson”, “a twenty-first-century Jonson”. More recently, Ian Donaldson’s biography (2011) and the new Cambridge edition (2012) have consolidated and rebalanced this ongoing critical reassessment.

1 The classic study of this duality in the earliest stages of its history is still Gerald Eades Bentley, Shakespeare and Jonson: their reputations in the seventeenth century compared, 2 vols, Chicago, Ill., The University of Chicago Press, 1945.
This essay broadly belongs within the general reappraisal that has marked Jonson studies (vis-à-vis the authorial shadow of Shakespeare) over the past three decades. This can be seen in the extent to which my reading of the balcony or window scenes in *The Merchant of Venice* and *Volpone* will sustain that an acknowledgement of proximities may in some cases prove critically more productive than an argument for disjunction, when we confront the two playwrights’ dramatic processing of acquisitive and erotic desire. I will be suggesting, especially, that whenever the perception of a contrast informs the argument, the particular shape of the distinction may evade traditional critical labelling. Likewise, I will resist polarising the two playwrights’ deployment of modal traits from satire and romance to represent love and ambition (or rather lust and greed) in the two comedies’ respective (and hardly identical) Venetian settings. Further, I will look into homologies as regards the construction of space in *The Merchant of Venice* ii. vi and *Volpone* ii. ii, both at the level of representation (the sort of urban space that Shakespeare and Jonson postulate in either case) and in the understanding and practice of performance space that underlies the two scenes.

As regards the plays’ representational range, they share the fascination that has often been labelled “the myth of Venice” – which in Early Modern English drama predated and arguably promoted Lewes Lewkenor’s 1599 version of Cardinal Gasparo Contarini’s 1543 description of the city’s constitutional rationale. The particular attraction that Shakespeare’s and Jonson’s contemporaries showed for the mercantile republic’s civic virtues, construed as closely related to the wealth of *La Serenissima*, was sometimes challenged by a parallel emphasis on the corruption that often attends on great wealth – the perception that, later in the seventeenth century, was to account for Thomas Otway’s epithet for Venice as “the Adriatic whore.”

A sense of this topicality can be productively combined with an alertness to the systemic relevance of space in theatre – its practice and study. My interest in the two plays’ respective construction and management of space draws on sources that are varied in their intellectual bearings and provide conceptual footholds that will remain implicit throughout most of this paper – but may here be briefly acknowledged in their diversity. They include some of those contributions to theatre semiotics that have proved so influential in discussions of the plurimedial nature of theatre since the final quarter of the twentieth century – such as the arguments propping Keir Elam’s contention that “However significant the temporal structure of the performance, […] the theatrical text is defined and perceived above all in spatial terms”. This general perception arguably converges with Anne Ubersfeld’s point that “the spatial structures reproduced in the

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6 A caveat: my use of terms such as comedy, romance, and satire neither essentializes such categories nor dismisses them, but rather endorses a perception of their heuristic value as conceptual and argumentative constructs that are historically contingent. This is in line with recent rejections of the operativity of genres and modes – e.g. Marion Thain (ed.), *The Lyric Poem: Formations and Transformations*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 1.


8 The phrase was to be coined by Thomas Otway for a passage of his great tragic success, *Venice Preserv’d* (1682), 2.3.

theatre define not so much a concrete world, but rather the image people have of spatial relationships and the conflicts underlying those relationships in the society in which they live”, as well as her claim that “theatrical space is the image (indeed the reverse, the negative image) and the counterproof of real space”. Such emphases on arguably systemic traits of spatiality in the theatre will be balanced, for my reading of scenes that are pointedly embedded in representations of historically specific urban dynamics, by a set of reflections on theatre space that involve historicization and an alertness to the ideological implications of how theatre sets up “locations in which cultural and political meanings can be produced spatially” – a perception that further entails a sense of mutual feedback between “performance space” and “the social space of the community”. My particular interest in the spatial dynamics of The Merchant of Venice and Volpone also acknowledges what Hanna Scolnicov has called “the theatricality and dramatic efficacy of window-scenes”, – which, when combined with “the guarded woman theme”, foreground the tension between limitation and enablement that social and gender hierarchies experience in the urban space, made both of circulation and constraint. In the two scenes, I will be interested in exploring how “the erotic drive at odds with the coercive, incarcerating power” responds to the impact of yet another determinant, the acquisitive drive boosted by the new economy of circulation and risk.

The mutual implication of systemic and topical suggested above comes to the fore with the opening lines of the short scene from The Merchant of Venice on which I will be focusing, II.vi. Through deixis, Gratiano’s words bind performance and representation, emphasising the two masquers’ presence and action as determinants of a sense of location and emplacement in the city’s built environment: “This is the penthouse under which Lorenzo / Desired us to make stand” (II.vi.1-2). Concomitantly, they suggest, through the inevitable bawdy pun on “stand”, the tension between their prescribed static wait and the forceful energy of erotic desire. This is extended in the ensuing dialogue through the imagery of “lovers [...] [running] before the clock” or the speed with which “Venus’s pigeons fly”, as well as through Gratiano’s dubious moralising on the pleasures of the chase, “All things that are / Are with more spirit chasèd than enjoyed” (II.vi.4-5, 12-13). This celebration of the urgency of desire as more gratifying than achievement or consummation itself is prompted by the amorous mission that determines the two men’s presence there, at their friend’s behest; but it becomes immediately troped in the commercial and voyaging terms that dominate the socio-economy and hence the expressive resources of Venice as epitome of the mercantile city. Thus, “the scarfed bark [that] puts from her native bay” is presented as propelled but also ruined by love as lust, both “hugged and embracèd” and “rent, and beggared by the strumpet wind” (II.vi.15-19).

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14 Scolnicov, Woman’s Theatrical Space, 63.
(Earlier lines refer to love's ties as "bonds" to be kept "unforfeited", words that resonate with the monetarized and contractual rationale of this Venice.)

Gratiano's claim that chasing is more rewarding than getting what one seeks is challenged, however, by Lorenzo's hard-nosed reasons for being late for the elopement of his own prospective bride: "Not I but my affairs have made you wait" (II.vi.22). The nature of these "affairs" which for Lorenzo took precedence over being under Jessica's balcony at the appointed time is not clarified, but they involve being elsewhere in the new urban world of circulation and exchange. They also entail, in other terms, a complex interface between the ethical and emotional domains proper to satire and romance as modes that alternate and entwine in Early Modern English comedy, even while they resist the argumentative comfort of polarisation. Ready at last to join his friends in "[playing] the thieves for wives" (II.vi.23) (after playing some other materially defined role elsewhere in the city, as required by his "affairs"), Lorenzo, also through deixis, acknowledges Jessica's appearance "above" (as indicated in the stage direction, both in Q and F): "Ho! Who's within?" (II.vi.25).

His exclamation is considerably less ecstatic than Romeo's in the quintessential and roughly coeval balcony scene, but the spatial relations and gendered features of Merchant 2.6, together with its pragmatics, are arguably similar: heralded by the verbalised surprise of the expectant male, the beloved appears above to be gazed at and looked up to, her heightened platform a reminder of the centuries-old elevation of the lady as beloved in such discursive regimes as courtly love and Petrarchism. The echoes of such discourses remain pervasive throughout the play, even in the Lorenzo-Jessica subplot, but they flounder in this scene under the weight of a materiality stressed, endorsed and practised by the lady herself. Lorenzo attempts a rhetoric of elevation by invoking "heaven and thy thoughts" as "witness" of their mutual belonging (II.vi.32), but Jessica responds with a "Here, catch this casket" (33) that brings such pretensions down under the sheer weight of money: the lady is for coming down to earth, rather than prompting the lover to join her on the rarefied heights of a donna angelicata. Further, her transit from enclosure in the domestic patriarchal space to the street below occurs with an ease that, to Jack D'Amico, confirms a playwright representing familiar urban settings, rather than the elsewhere otherwise suggested by exotic toponymy: "Lorenzo has no need for a rope-ladder because Shylock leaves a house [...] like the merchant houses throughout London, [...] not a medieval tower where the daughter can be locked up". Transvestism enhances the scene's ambivalence, since Jessica's matter-of-factness, her forward and downward course from domestic contemplation to action and circulation in the urban environment, appear directly bound to her male disguise, the ostensible object of a remark that might refer as well to her thievery and mobility (out of her father's house): "I am much ashamed of my exchange" (II.vi.35 – my emphasis).

As the focal event and motion of the scene, Jessica's descent from her balcony or window is the explicit object of much of the dialogue; that it originates and eventuates in human love, from desire to consummation, prompts a considerable lot of sexual innuendo in the scene, from Lorenzo's encouragement for her to "Descend, for you must be my torchbearer" (40) to her own acknowledgement of how "light" her "shames" will be shown to be when a "candle" is brought close to them (41-2). But the playwright also embeds in the character's constructed awareness of the import of her appearance above, followed by

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her descending motion, an allusion to the ineffability that otherwise might envelop the image of a lady on some unreachable platform – or altar. Indeed, Jessica’s final lines in the scene, before a stage direction gives her as already appearing “below”, contain the infamous passage on stealing yet more money from her father: “I will [...] gild myself / With some more ducats, and be with you straight” (49-50). This is rich in implications. In the history of representations of women in European cultures, the bond between gold and the lady’s image almost invariably concerns immaterial perfection: this is epitomised in the golden hair of Petrarch’s Laura, celebrated in his sonnet 90 (“Erano i capei d’oro...”) as proper to a being whose “walk” is hardly “mortal,” and has an English evocation in the gold “covering” of “Queen Virtue’s court” of Sidney’s Astrophil and Stella (sonnet 9). On the side of religion, the link between gold and womanhood recurs in countless ornate images of Mary (the transit of which to secular instances in post-Reformation England has often been discussed). Shakespeare’s Jessica offers a remark that relates satirically to such images, since her “gilding” of herself is starkly material, and, rather than experiencing “assumption” into heaven, it involves successfully weighting herself down to earth (loaded with gold coins). This perception is hardly dispelled by Lorenzo’s exclamatory response extolling her virtues, which indeed echoes the terms of an earlier celebration of Portia by the no less acquisitively driven Bassanio; and it is rather confirmed by her silence in the rest of the scene (Jessica utters no word in this scene once she appears at street level), suggesting that her function has been fulfilled for now. Jessica’s self-satire as manquée donna angelicata becomes a striking instance of the qualifications that romance undergoes in this comedy (arguably in much of Shakespeare’s conventionally styled romantic comedy); and, through her, the playwright offers a risible spin on the topos of the “woman in the window” and the gendered tension that it sets off between constraint and aspiration, enclosure and a prospect on the world out there.

This prompts me to consider my other instance of a balcony scene featuring a woman hailed or serenaded in a Venetian environment full of talk of gold. As in the window scene of The Merchant of Venice, Volpone ii.i uses deictic markers to identify the elevated space on which and from which the scene’s spirited exchanges will be played out, and to give salience to its protagonists:

PEREGRINE. Who be these, sir?

ii.i. [Enter to them] MOSCA [and] NANO [disguised as attendants for a mountebank, who begin to erect a stage].

MOSCA. [to NANO] Under that window, there’t must be. The same.

(ii.i.122, ii.i.1)²⁰

This is the point at which Sir Politic Would-Be, the foolish knight turned traveller, identifies the newly arrived as “Italian mountebanks” to the wiser (and arguably authorial)

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²⁸ See Helen Hackett, Virgin Mother, Maiden Queen: Elizabeth I and the Cult of the Virgin Mary, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 1995.
²⁹ Scolnicov, Woman’s Theatrical Space, p. 63 and passim.
Peregrine: “Fellows to mount a bank!” (ii.ii.2). The scene’s spatiality entwines the performative and the social in intriguing ways. Indeed, the platform or scaffold stage that Mosca and Nano set up stresses their status as stage hands and actors in secondary roles vis-à-vis Volpone’s performances, which began in the most indoor and exclusive of spaces, the bedchamber of an oligarch, to continue in the most public of arenas, the piazza; but the excursion from enclosed to open space will enhance the conditions for Mosca later to try his own swindle and switch from steward to master. Volpone’s move to the piazza suggests downward mobility, from Magnifico to mountebank; however, the assumed role’s very description (montainbanco) describes an upward movement which not only involves verbal and gestural empowerment over the crowd, but also combines theatrical self-gratification with erotic aspirations regarding the lady in the window (ostensibly the primary motive for playing the mountebank on that spot), and such aspirations are expressed through tropes of rising and mounting.

This tension between upward and downward is matched by the counter-discourses that structure the dialogue between Sir Pol and Peregrine, almost as a prologue to Volpone’s appearance – the foolish knight elevating mountebanks to the status of “the only knowing men of Europe” (ii.ii.9), while Peregrine downplays them as “most lewd impostors” (14). Despite Peregrine’s arguable closeness to an authorial norm, the tension retains an element of unresolvedness through the homology between mountebank and player – a case of drama denouncing itself, while flaunting its attractions. The scene is memorable for Volpone’s verbal inventiveness and intra-dramatic persuasiveness as Scoto Mantuano, thriving on a language of excess that includes self-agrandisement by name-dropping – “the Cardinals Montalto, Fernese, the great Duke of Tuscany, my gossip, with divers other princes” (153-54) – a lush catalogue of diseases for which the mountebank promises a cure – “the maiali caduco, cramps, convulsions, paralyzes, epilepsies, tremor cordia, retired nerves, ill vapours of the spleen, stoppings of the liver, the stone, the strangury, hernia ventosa, iliaca passio; [...] dysenteria [...] the torsion of the small guts, melancolia hypocondriaca” (90-96) – and above all his contemptuous dismissal of rivals, those “ground ciarlitani” who perform without the elevation of a platform and become targets for grotesque invective: “These turdy-facey-nasty-patey-lousy-fartical rogues” (46, 54).

Such language, written for a thoroughly transgressive character, could hardly be more opposed to the ethical-cum-rhetorical values that Jonson preached in such texts as Timber, or Discoveries, his book of maxims and catalogue of accumulated knowledge. In it, he inveighed against “the disease of talking”, explicitly associated with the figure of “a mountebank” (lines 248, 250); and he equated corruption of manners with corruption of language (lines 680-87), while protesting his love of “pure and neat language” (line 1325) and his loathing of any “superfluous circuit of figures and digressions” (lines 1574-75).21 Almost as an epitome of Jonson’s complex relation to the grounds of his own success as a writer for the popular stage in an Early Modern mercantile city, the language he writes for Volpone as Scoto Mantuano proves risibly attractive to audiences (both intra- and extra-dramatic, i.e. audiences facing both Volpone’s and Jonson’s stages); and its entertaining persuasiveness ensures the material success (even if transient) of those who deploy it in the new urban world driven by exchange value and acquisitive drives. Volpone’s verbal and

gestural powers ensure, both earlier and later in the play, a constant flow of riches in the direction of his palace; and, on the platform that allows him to address the piazza and the window, they captivate the groundlings and the attentions of the lady who watches and hears him from above – even if such attentions are construed by innocent Celia herself in radically different terms from both Volpone and her husband.

This returns us to a joint consideration of the two window scenes, and their relation to the plot and representational range of their respective comedies. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Jessica responded to Lorenzo’s amorous bid by showering her father’s money on him, as a prologue to lowering herself from window or balcony to the ground and making a gift of herself – the play at no point suggesting that this might be other than conscious and willing on her part. In *Volpone*, Celia responds to the mountebank’s ostensibly mercantile discourse by complying with an instruction the significance of which she proves to ignore – since she performs a gesture, the dropping of a handkerchief (the quintessential love token, indeed a token for the lady herself), that emerges full of amorous promise from the long history of courtship and seduction in European cultures (compounded, for Jonson’s primary audiences, by the possible memory of the fatal consequences of a dropped handkerchief in yet another Venetian play, *Othello*).

Equivocation and deception envelop the two scenes. In *The Merchant of Venice*, however, the deceived party (the Jew, who loses daughter and ducats) is absent from the scene, while Jessica and the active agents of her descent from balcony or window know well the significance and consequences of their actions; whereas in *Volpone* the traffic of word and gesture between the piazza, the banco on which the mountebank performs and the window that focuses his ambition is thoroughly defined by deception and/or misreading. Volpone tricks all who watch and hear him about his identity and the nature and direction of his desires (material and erotic); Celia, taking what she believes to be a commercial bargain at face value, misconstrues her own yielding gesture at a window from which she has no intention of descending; while others who watch it (Volpone and Corvino) misconstrue it too as a sign of her sexual availability.

The set of implications that the two balcony / window scenes carry, and the place they hold in their respective dramatic economies, arguably make them central to the plots of the two plays. Jessica’s elopement is more than a subplot replicating the Bassanio, Portia and Antonio main plot – even while calquing some of its conditions. Indeed, in either case a daughter finds her way out of the constraints created by her father’s power over her future (even if by distinct means); this involves taking an enterprising (and materially reckless) Venetian for a husband; and the success of the venture hinges on the contents of a “casket” that in one case contains the lady’s image, and in the other a counterpart of herself, that which the awaiting lover is prompted to “catch”, in the form of gold coins. In its clearheaded focus on success and the pursuit of gain, this is a world that rather pointedly does not confirm Harold Bloom’s reading of the life of these nominal Italians as ruled by hedonism and the *dolce far’ niente* on some avant-la-lettre Fellini set: “Everyone is a lot fresher than they were going to be four centuries later in *La Dolce Vita*, but basically they are the same set”.  

Emanating from the economy of exchange in the protocapitalist city, the brazenness of its materiality makes the balcony scene in *The Merchant of Venice* ii.vi indeed an important satirical comment on the rarefied romance heights of Belmont. However, the scene proves instrumental rather than merely illustrative or corroborating as

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regards the central strands of the play’s action. It is the starkness of Jessica’s thievery and reported dissipation on her way to Belmont that explicitly boosts Shylock’s urge for revenge, eventuating in the courtroom scene and the Jew’s personal, material and social annihilation (arguably the emotional core of the play in its critical and theatrical history). Further, the lovers carry their satirical mitigation of the plot’s romance elements over to Belmont, the playwright giving them the famous dialogue in v.i that, through its evocation of fatal precedents for dashing and transgressive young love, pointedly qualifies (in advance) the ostensible and imminent happy ending.

The window scene in Volpone is likewise more than an additional opportunity for the protagonist to triumph, histrionically and verbally, over those he addresses, pointedly including the lady above the piazza – and the scene’s functional value foregrounds the play’s close imbrication of performative and social space. Volpone’s ability (in this one scene) to shift the stage for his solo performances from indoors to outdoors, from enclosed and controlled to open and contingent space, seems provisionally to advance his vanity and erotic ambition, but it also reduces his control over the spaces in which he lives and moves – and with this window scene his plot starts unravelling, as shown by the beating he takes from Corvino on the piazza. That this same jealous husband who beats him up in his disguise as Scoto shortly afterwards brings his young wife to him as Volpone, one of the city’s greats, seems to vindicate Volpone’s excursion to the piazza; but when Bonario, inside Volpone’s mansion (previously, an impregnable private space), ruins his attempted seduction of Celia this shows that it is Volpone’s outward move that propels the action towards ruin. The play’s punitive ending famously envisages Volpone’s destruction as a deferred death penalty: “And since the most was gotten by imposture, / By feigning lame, gout, palsy, and such diseases, / Thou art to lie in prison, cramped with irons, / Till thou be’st sick and lame indeed” (v.xii.121-24). The enforced stasis to which Volpone is sentenced arguably reflects Jonson’s spatial conservatism\(^{25}\) – a belief that the mobility of enterprising individuals jockeying for an edge over others in the competitive space of the mercantile city was plain bad old greed, rather than an economic virtue under the new dispensation ruled by exchange value. And this prompts a final reflection on the conditions under which a reading of The Merchant of Venice and Volpone centred on the two balcony / window scenes can break out of the traditional descriptive mould that counterpoints a strand of comedy grounded on narrative models from romance to one grounded on classical comedy with a strong satirical modalisation.

Jessica’s transgressive flight from her father’s house, ecstatically applauded by Lorenzo and his friends, is shown for what it is: a combination of amorous impetus and hardnosed, transgressive materialism; but its exposure (with satirical traits) does not preclude its validation in the play’s happy ending. Indeed, the high-risk venture that sees Jessica abandon the enclosed and static conditions of Shylock’s domestic space to enter the world of urban mobility, propelled by her father’s expropriated liquidity, is sanctioned by her welcome to Belmont and an ultimate showering of returns – in the form of the will enforced from Shylock, that will see Lorenzo and Jessica heirs to whatever fortune remains after their theft from him, the spending spree recounted in III.i, and the judicial despoliations of IV.i. Apart from Shylock, all participants in the play’s risk economy see their ambitions materially fulfilled; and the

play’s emphasis on a world of successful circulation (of people, of wealth) proper to the new protocapitalist and urban economy of risk might earn the play the label city comedy. And this in spite of its location in sunny elsewhere rather than in London, and a happy ending that preserves formal conditions from the world of romance, with some satirical qualification.

As for Volpone, the play is also marked by uncertainties involving Jonson’s representation of its urban space and the human urges that it accommodates. In spite of Jonson’s choice of Venice for his play’s location, with the train of associations and homologies mentioned above and a dramatic time at no point indicated as remote, key aspects of the play’s plot and characters come across as non-specific to a time and place. True, the text is punctuated by learned references involving Italian culture and the toponymy of Venice, possibly through sources such as John Florio (as suggested long ago by Mario Praz) – which reminds us that, among his contemporary dramatists, Jonson was in fact the one that had a greater sense of the vernacular cultures of the Europe of his day. Conversely, his three following major comedies (Epicoene, The Alchemist, Bartholomew Fair) were to offer strikingly detailed satirical representations of Early Modern London and the urges that activated individuals and groups in the city’s daily life.

As regards Volpone, however, its plot construction and characterisation seem to reflect more emphatically the author’s familiarity with classical sources and his penchant for allegorised moralisation. This is, in fact, how the play can be seen to relate to contemporary conditions such as the rise of commercial capitalism: Jonson allegorises it through the predatory dynamics of the animal fable, rather than offer representations that at any point may come across as literal. It is noteworthy that at no point does Volpone see his cavalier claims of aloofness from the ordinary material concerns of the mercantile city – “I glory / More in the cunning purchase of my wealth / Than in the glad possession, since I gain / No common way: I use no trade, no venture” (i.1.30-33) – challenged, or exposed as ordinary greed; nor does any character emerge as determined by actual material hardships (penury or debt) of a kind that The Merchant of Venice in fact foregrounds. In Volpone, money is always an issue – but always through the unstoppable greed of characters who, suffering from no lack, would never admit to having enough, and might illustrate a timeless human cupidity rather than historically particular profiles.

It is surely striking, for our confrontation of these two contemporaries, that these remarks are prompted by a play written by the one dramatist of whose involvement with the teeming city around him we know a bit more. This is largely through his later London comedies, but also, rather, pointedly, through the closing data in his Dedication of Volpone to “The Two Famous Universities.” Penned by this partly self-taught writer whom some would dub disparagingly “the bricklayer of Westminster” (an echo of hardships in his early life), the dedication is pointedly signed, dated, and located in the very heart of the City, where Jonson made a point of owning property: “From my house in the Black-Friars”.

24 D’Amico, Shakespeare and Italy, 28.
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