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What is a Greek Source on the Early English Stage? Fifteen New Essays

Edited by Silvia Bigliazzi and Tania Demetriou

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Aristophanes in *The Staple of News*: Ideology and Drama*

Francesco Morosi

Abstract

This essay aims at reassessing Aristophanic presence in Ben Jonson's *The Staple of News* (first performed in 1626). Although single verbal references to Aristophanic drama are scant in the play, it will be contended that both the ideological posture and the dramatic technique of the English play are strongly influenced by Jonson's in-depth reading of Aristophanes. This will also lead us to re-evaluate at least partially Jonson's intertextual strategies.

Keywords: Ben Jonson; *The Staple of News*; Aristophanes' *Wealth*; Aristophanes' *Wasps*; Aristophanes' *Clouds*; Generation Gap; Dramatic Technique; Early Modern English Drama

1.

Humiliated by the servile state into which Pennyboy Sr has got her, Lady Pecunia, the personification of money in Ben Jonson's *Staple of News*, needs to be reassured of her own reputation. Thus, the old miser embarks on a long tirade on the powers of money:

> Pennyboy Sr You are a noble, young, free, gracious lady,
> And would be everybody's in your bounty,
> But you must not be so. They are a few
> That know your merit, lady, and can value't.
> Yourself scarce understands your proper powers.
> They are almighty, and that we your servants,
> That have the honour here to stand so near you,
> Know, and can use too. All this nether world
> Is yours; you command it and do sway it;
> The honour of it and the honesty,

* This essay is part of the "Classical Receptions in Early Modern English Drama" Research Project of National Interest (PRIN2017XAA3ZF) supported by the Italian Ministry of Education, University, and Research (MUR).

> The reputation, ay, and the religion
> (I was about to say, and had not erred)
> Is Queen Pecunia's – for that style is yours,
> If mortals knew Your Grace, or their own good.
> (2.1.31-44)[1]

Although more than one source can be provided for this passage[2] and for the personification itself of money,[3] these lines are evidently indebted to a famous scene from Aristophanes' *Wealth* (388 BCE), where Chremylus, the protagonist, and Cario, his slave, try to convince a fearful Wealth that he is by far the most powerful among the gods.[4] The scene (Aristoph. *Pl.* 124-97) is a prolonged parody of ancient hymns,[5] which often asked the gods for favours by first reminding them about their own ἀρεταί, powers. As was rightly observed (Medda 2013², 2005, 20), the aretalogy in *Wealth* is somewhat paradoxical, since until the very end of the scene, Wealth, a god, is not at all convinced to have all the powers that the two mortals are conferring on him. Like Pennyboy Sr in *The Staple of*

1 For the purposes of this paper, I will take into consideration the 1626 edition of the play (printed in 1631). Henceforth, the text will be quoted from Loewenstein's edition, in Jonson 2012, vol. 6.

2 See especially the opening scene of *Volpone*, where Volpone worships his money as if it were a saint.

3 In antiquity, see for instance Hor. *Ep.* 1.6.37, where *regina Pecunia* is mentioned along with other deities such as Venus or deified personifications such as *Suadela*, Persuasion; Πλοῦτος, the personification of wealth in Lucian's *Timon* (as was recently shown, Lucian exerted a considerable influence over Jonson's works: Miola 2019). In the early modern age, the allegorical personification of money was also quite widespread: see e.g. Richard Barnfield's *Encomium of Lady Pecunia: or the Praise of Money* (1598); Lady Munera in Book V of Edmund Spencer's *Faerie Queen* (1596); Money in *The Contention between Liberality and Prodigality* (1602).

4 Curiously enough, one of the most influential studies on the relationship between Aristophanes and Jonson (Gum 1969) does not include this passage from *The Staple of News* among those showing Jonson's reading of Aristophanic plays. But see Loewenstein's note *ad* 35-6 in Jonson 2012, vol. 6. Steggle 2007, 62 also describes this scene as dependent on *Wealth*, although he considers the verbal parallels "not entirely clear and decisive".

5 This was already noticed by Kleinknecht 1937, 211-2, who labelled this passage from *Wealth* as an instance of *Gebetsparodie*.

News, Chremylus and Cario explain to Wealth that he presides over the whole world, since money is the universal currency: even Zeus owes his own power to the fact that he is rich. Chremylus thus reaches the easy conclusion (*Pl.* 146) that ἅπαντα τῷ πλουτεῖν γάρ ἐσθ' ὑπήκοα[6] ("everything is subordinate to wealth"), a statement that is echoed by Jonson's "All this nether world / is yours" (38-9). Even more interestingly, Jonson's praise of the omnipotence of wealth includes religion among the many fields which Lady Pecunia dominates (41-3). This seems to me a clear enough parallel with a significant part of Aristophanes' paradoxical demonstration of the power of money – Wealth's influence over religion and rites (Aristoph. *Pl.* 133-43):

Χρ. θύουσι δ' αὐτῷ διὰ τίν'; οὐ διὰ τουτονί;
Κα. καὶ νὴ Δί' εὔχονταί γε πλουτεῖν ἄντικρυς.
Χρ. οὔκουν ὅδ' ἐστὶν αἴτιος καὶ ῥᾳδίως
παύσει' ἄν, εἰ βούλοιτο, ταῦθ';
Πλ. ὁτιὴ τί δή;
Χρ. ὅτι οὐδ' ἂν εἷς θύσειεν ἀνθρώπων ἔτι
οὐ βοῦν ἄν, οὐχὶ ψαιστόν, οὐκ ἄλλ' οὐδὲ ἕν,
μὴ βουλομένου σοῦ.
Πλ. πῶς;
Χρ. ὅπως; οὐκ ἔσθ' ὅπως
ὠνήσεται δήπουθεν, ἢν σὺ μὴ παρὼν
αὐτὸς διδῷς τἀργύριον· ὥστε τοῦ Διὸς
τὴν δύναμιν, ἢν λυπῇ τι, καταλύσεις μόνος.
Πλ. τί λέγεις; δι' ἐμὲ θύουσιν αὐτῷ;
Χρ. φήμ' ἐγώ.
(133-44)

[Ch. And who's the cause of people sacrificing to Zeus? Isn't it him? Ca. Yes, and indeed they pray in so many words to become rich. Ch. So isn't he the cause of it all, and couldn't he easily stop it if he wanted to? WE. Why do you say that? Ch. Because not a single person could offer sacrifices anymore – not an ox, not a ground-cake, not anything at all – if you didn't want them to. We. How

6 Unless otherwise specified, Aristophanes' texts will be quoted from N.G. Wilson's edition (Aristophanes 2007). Translations are by A.H. Sommerstein (Aristophanes 1982, 1983, 1998, 2001), slightly modified.

> come? CH. How come? There's no way they can buy the things, of course, unless you yourself are with them and give them the money. So, if you're aggrieved at all with Zeus, you can overthrow his power all by yourself. WE. What are you saying? That I make them sacrifice to him? CH. That's right.]

Another instance of Aristophanes' widespread criticism against popular religion and its form as a cynical *do ut des*, this passage also contains an indication on the finale of the comedy: by showing that worshipping Wealth is far more advantageous than worshipping Zeus, Chremylus will actually stop everybody sacrificing to Zeus, and by so doing will eventually defeat him. It seems to me that, although a rather scant reference, Jonson's mention of religion as dependent on money is yet another touch that derives from the reading of *Wealth*. To be sure, Jonson is not offering a translation – not even an adaptation – of the scene from *Wealth*. However, it is also quite clear that he is considering that scene, and is freely reshaping it – by choosing, summarising, and rewriting some of its contents. From this passage we can be fairly sure, then, that at this moment in his life, Jonson had read and knew at least some of Aristophanes' plays, and used them, among many other texts, as a source of inspiration, and adaptation, for single passages and more general elements of plot and characterization.

This passage from act 2 goes hand in hand with a scene in act 5, where another Aristophanic cameo can be spotted: among the many oddities ascribed to Pennyboy Sr, gone mad for having been deprived of Lady Pecunia, we hear that he is taking his two dogs to trial (5.3.32ff.), an evident reference to Philocleon's hilarious trial of two dogs in Aristophanes' *Wasps* (Aristoph. *Vesp.* 891-1002). In this case, no textual hint may be found that points to specific knowledge of Aristophanes' text (the only, very scant, hint may be the charge against the dogs: the "plot to cozen", at 5.3.36, may recall the charge in *Wasps*, where the dog Labes is accused of having eaten up all the Sicilian cheese). In fact, differences look more substantial than similarities: whereas in *Wasps* the dogs interpret the two opposing parties, the plaintiff and the defendant, in *The Staple* both dogs interpret the role of the defendant, with Pennyboy Sr playing the part of judge and prosecutor. Although Aristophanic in its tone,

then, the dogs' trial is not really comparable to the aretalogy of Lady Pecunia in act 2, since it does not prove a direct reading of *Wasps*, but just general knowledge of its plot.[7] To sum up, then Aristophanes' verbal presence in the *Staple* looks quite scant.

The extent to which Aristophanic comedy impacted on early modern English drama is a topic that still invites critical contributions. This is particularly the case with Ben Jonson's works, whose dependence on Aristophanes and ancient comedy has long been a scholarly *cliché*.[8] As Alessandro Grilli and I have tried to show elsewhere (2023), however, the terms of this dependence are open for discussion. At least after 1607, Jonson had certainly read Aristophanes, as his library shows.[9] But such reading looks hardly comparable to that of other Greek or Latin poets: Jonson's own markings on these editions are scant, and his knowledge of Greek, although certainly deeper than that of most contemporaries, does

7 The dogs' trial in *The Staple* gives us a surprising scholarly clue about Aristophanic reception, though. As first noticed by Parr in Jonson 1988, Jonson seems here to conflate two famously mad old characters: Philocleon and Lear. In *King Lear* 4.5.155, Lear, already in his madness, speaks of the usurer as hanging the cozener, a remarkably similar situation to that of Pennyboy Sr, a usurer judging two cozeners. To the best of my knowledge, Jonson is by far the first ever reader of Aristophanes to relate Philocleon and Lear – a very productive line of interpretation, which was taken, in recent years, by Fabbro 2013.

8 A *cliché* deriving directly from Jonson, who stressed the ties between his works and ancient comedy more than once: see e.g. the induction to *Every Man Out of His Humour*, where Cordatus describes the play as "something like *Vetus Comoedia*" (227; ed. R. Martin, in Jonson 2012, vol. 1). Such idea then spread throughout the scholarship, and dominated last century's studies on the subject: see e.g. Gum 1969; Lafkidou Dick 1974. For an updated, and more balanced, perspective, see Steggle 2007, esp. 59-64, and 2019.

9 McPherson 1974. According to McPherson, Jonson owned two editions of Aristophanes' works, one (Édouard Biset de Charlais's *Aristophanis comoediae undecim, cum scholiis antiquis*) published in 1607, and the other (a general collection of Greek poets: *Poetae Graeci Veteres Tragici, Comici, Lyrici, Epigrammatarii Additis Fragmentis ex probatis authoribus collectis, nunc primum Graece & Latine in unum redacti corpus*) in 1614. The former contained the Greek text of the eleven extant comedies with a Latin translation and a collection of ancient and modern commentaries; the latter had a complete Greek text with Latin translation but no notes.

not seem deep enough to read the original text of Aristophanic comedies in full.[10] It comes as no surprise, then, that explicit and direct references to Aristophanes are altogether quite rare and episodic in the Jonsonian *corpus*. This reduces the critical value of an integrally intertextual reading of Aristophanes' and Jonson's works.[11] The reshaping of the aretalogy scene from *Wealth* which we have just analysed – one of the most explicit references to Aristophanes throughout the play – is an excellent example, showing us that the relationship between Ben Jonson and Aristophanes has not so much to do with overt verbal parallels and adaptations of entire textual sequences. This observation, however, does not close the subject at all. As a matter of fact, intertextuality – understood as a specific, explicit, and close textual elaboration of a given hypotext –[12] is most certainly not the only productive way to look at the literary, and dramatic, interactions between two *corpora*, and two authors. In fact, the relationship between Aristophanes and Ben Jonson looks like a useful testing ground for a broader literary perspective, taking us beyond the understanding of any literary echo in terms of 'quotation'. This perspective would also allow us to acquire a systemic point of view, taking into account the fact that textual relationships are hardly ever isolated and exclusive relationships between one text and one single source.

This essay aims to show the potentialities of such an approach by offering an 'Aristophanic' reading of Ben Jonson's *Staple of News*: it will contend that, although verbal parallels are rare, Aristophanes exerted a deeper influence on the dramatic, thematic, characterological, and ideological structure of the play, or of some

10 Victoria Moul's studies on Jonson's Pindaric receptions (2007, 2010, ch. 1, and 2012) have shown a quite intense relationship with his Greek model. However, as in case of Aristophanes, that relationship has a fundamental Latin mediator, Horace.

11 Under this respect, I cannot agree with Matthew Steggle when he concludes that with Jonson we are seeing one of those authors "who know the works of Aristophanes, writing for an audience who also know Aristophanes, and who are making specific intertextual allusions to those plays" (Steggle 2007, 64).

12 See especially the interpretive approach adopted by some of the most influential works on the subject: Gum 1969; Lafkidou Dick 1974; Steggle 2007.

parts of it. This observation will give us an interesting insight into Jonson's 'intertextual' strategies, and will contribute to our reappraisal of the Jonson-Aristophanes relationship.

2.

In 1969, Coburn Gum already noticed one prominent feature of *The Staple of News* that Ben Jonson must have derived from Aristophanes.[13] The basis upon which most of *The Staple* rests is the brilliant idea that an abstract commodity such as news can be treated as if it were a material one. In fact, news is not even a commodity: logically speaking, as a non-exclusive good – that is, a good whose possession by an individual does not inevitably exclude its possession by any other subject –[14] news and knowledge couldn't be either accumulated or sold. On the contrary, the comic process by which the Staple works in Jonson's play consists in a form of accumulation and brokering of news – the office receives news from informants, then buys the news, and while buying it, it also 'certifies' it:

> Fitton And if a man will assure his news, he may:
> Twopence a sheet he shall be warranted,
> And have a policy for't.
> (1.5.64-6)

By constituting itself as the only viable hub for news, the Staple invites its informants to entrust their news to the Staple alone. By so doing, the market comically makes a non-exclusive good exclusive: thus, it makes it a material, purchasable commodity. Once bought from the informants, any piece of news can then be sold again:

> [*Enter*] *First Costumer:* [*Dopper,*] *a she-Anabaptist.*
> Dopper Ha' you, in your profane shop, any news
> O'the saints at Amsterdam?

13 See esp. Gum 1969, 176-7. More recently, see Steggle 2007, 62 and Miola 2014, 499.

14 This definition is taken from Luigi Lombardi Vallauri's codification of goods (2012[2]).

REGISTER Yes. How much would you?
DOPPER Six pennyworth.
REGISTER Lay your money down. [*Dopper pays.*] Read, Thomas.
. . .
DOPPER Have you no other of that species?
REGISTER Yes,
But dearer; it will cost you a shilling.
DOPPER [*Offering money*] Verily,
There is a ninepence; I will shed no more.
REGISTER Not to the good o'the saints?
DOPPER I am not sure
That man is good.
REGISTER [*To Tom*] Read, from Constantinople,
Nine penny'orth.
(*SN* 3.2.123-41)

Like actual commodities, any piece of news can be priced based on its worth (its worth being determined, as per the economic model of price determination, by the clients' demand). Of course, the fact that Register can produce different pieces of news on the same subject based on what his clients are willing to offer (then, are willing to hear) shows the real value of news sold at the Staple: one gains the distinct impression that Register's news is tampered with or directly counterfeit, and that the work at the Staple is nothing more than a con operation.

Gum rightly observed that such features are parallelled by Aristophanes' *Clouds*, where another institution, Socrates' φροντιστήριον (or Thinkery), is based on a very similar process of commodification of knowledge. Socrates and their pupils have an exclusive monopoly of knowledge, which they have stored within the Thinkery, an almost impenetrable house. Upon payment, they are available to reveal parts of their precious and esoteric knowledge (Aristoph. *Nub.* 98-9):

οὗτοι διδάσκουσ', ἀργύριον ἤν τις διδῷ,
λέγοντα νικᾶν καὶ δίκαια κἄδικα.

[These people teach you, if you pay them, how to carry the day in argument, whether your case is just or unjust.]

The reason why knowledge can be traded is that it is indissolubly linked with money. From Strepsiades' perspective, being able to prevail in speaking means being able to win in any lawsuit – then not to be obliged to pay any debts (*Nub.* 112-8):

> εἶναι παρ' αὐτοῖς φασιν ἄμφω τὼ λόγω,
> τὸν κρείττον', ὅστις ἐστί, καὶ τὸν ἥττονα.
> τούτοιν τὸν ἕτερον τοῖν λόγοιν, τὸν ἥττονα,
> νικᾶν λέγοντά φασι τἀδικώτερα.
> ἢν οὖν μάθῃς μοι τὸν ἄδικον τοῦτον λόγον,
> ἃ νῦν ὀφείλω διὰ σέ, τούτων τῶν χρεῶν
> οὐκ ἂν ἀποδοίην οὐδ' ἂν ὀβολὸν οὐδενί.
> (112-18)

> [It's said that they have in their house both the Arguments, the Better, whatever that may be, and the Worse; and that one of this pair of Arguments, the Worse, can plead an unjust cause and prevail. Well, if you learn this Wrongful Argument for me, then of these debts that I owe now because of you, I wouldn't have to pay an obol to anyone.]

Thus, both Aristophanes and Jonson present us with a paradoxical commodification of knowledge. I believe, however, that the comparison between the Staple and the Thinkery can be pushed beyond a broad formal similarity. Interestingly, such correspondence in plot produces extremely similar results, from both a dramaturgical and an ideological point of view – which in my opinion demonstrates clearly enough that this parallel is not fortuitous, or superficial, at all.

Firstly, ideology. As we have seen, the trading of news in the Staple is clearly represented by Jonson as a fraud, a dishonest strategy aimed at making money out of deceiving gullible clients. Not surprisingly, the Staple and its staff are inextricably linked with Pennyboy Jr and his club of Jeerers, that is, wicked imposters who make a living out of deceiving their neighbour: once the Staple blows up (on which more later), Cymbal, the master of the Staple, is said to be back as "grand captain of the Jeerers" (*SN* 5.1.48); and at least two of the Jeerers, Fitton and Picklock, also serve as informants for the Staple. In Jonson's view, those young Jeerers represent the

product of a spineless and immoral new generation, a *jeunesse dorée* that was made frivolous by the "common follies" (The Prologue for the Court, 11) of the era. Among those "follies" Jonson identifies a new, degenerate idea of education and culture (of which printed corantos and the news agency business themselves are an evident phenomenon)[15] as mostly responsible for the deterioration of mores. Not surprisingly, once he is convinced he has finally secured Lady Pecunia for himself, Pennyboy Jr plans on founding a new college – one whose faculty only consists in vagabonds (as its own name denounces), rascals and jeerers:[16]

PENNYBOY JR . . . Now I think of it,
A noble whimsy's come into my brain:
Canters' College begun to be erected.
I'll build a college, I and my Pecunia,
And call it Canters' College. Sounds it well?
ALMANAC Excellent!
PENNYBOY JR And here stands my father rector,
And you professors – you shall all profess
Something, and live there with Her Grace and me,
Your founders. I'll endow't with lands and means,
And Lickfinger shall be my master cook.
(*SN* 4.4.79-87)

As Joseph Loewenstein summed up, throughout *The Staple* Jonson's posture appears as "both serenely and hysterically conservative", "gloomily and hilariously nostalgic for the ethos of a military aristocracy now felt to be so fully degraded that the disguised father of *The Staple of News* might with mocking gaiety describe his son, surrounded by spurrier and barber, linener, haberdasher, and shoemaker, as 'an heir in the midst of his forces'" (Loewenstein in Jonson 2012, vol. 6). *The Staple*, then, ends up as a war between

15 Although of course the commerce in information (in manuscript and, later, in print) was already well established some forty years before the production of *The Staple of News*: see e.g. Love 1993, esp. 9-20.

16 It is just possible that Jonson had a specific case in mind when describing the whimsical new institution founded by Pennyboy Jr (as McKenzie suggests: 1973, 120-1). However, it does not seem necessary to presume the parody of an exact historical fact.

the generations, fought around a changing conception of culture, manners, and values.

Just as vividly as Jonson, Aristophanes, too, stages a war between generations in some of his comedies.[17] Both *Clouds* and *Wasps* – two plays that must have been chronologically close[18] – deal with the fallout of the break in a father-son relationship. In *Clouds*, Strepsiades struggles to convince his son, Pheidippides, to attend Socrates' school, and when he does convince him, he ends up being beaten by his own son; in *Wasps*, Philocleon, an old Athenian, is detained by his son Bdelicleon in his own house, so that he cannot go and perform his jury duty, but in the end, he manages to be freed and rejuvenated. In both plays, the problematic relationship between father and son is thematised, and is depicted as exemplary of a rift between two generations, and two different epochs in Athenian society. For Aristophanes', however, this is not a neutral observation on the change of τρόποι, of morals. On the contrary, the depiction of a problematic father-son relationship brings about a ferocious political discussion on the degeneration of Athens. The older generation – which Aristophanes describes, with a slight and significant anachronism, as the one that fought against the Persians in Marathon – is given all positive political values: it is the generation that effectively built the glory of Athens. Faced with a momentous crisis in Athens, Aristophanes offers his audience a quite simple way out: the only way to obtain the σωτηρία, the salvation, of the city is to go back to the good old times when everything worked. The present, and the present generation of Athenians, are consistently represented as the byproduct of an almost unstoppable decline, to which the only solution appears an impracticable – although comically effective –

17 The label "war of generations" was first used for *Clouds* and *Wasps* by Whitman 1964, 119-66. Later, the generation gap in Aristophanic drama was analysed by Handley 1993; Strauss 1993, 153-166; Sutton 1993; Fabbro 2013; Telò 2010 and 2016; Morosi 2018 and 2020. On the historical context, see Forrest 1975 and Ostwald 1986, 229-50.

18 As is well known, we do not possess the first version of *Clouds*, staged in 423 BCE. The play was a complete failure, and was rewritten, and possibly re-performed, some years later (Rosen 1997; Sonnino 2005; Revermann 2006, 326-32; Biles 2011, 167-210; Marshall 2001², Wright 2012, 63-4). *Wasps* was first staged one year after *Clouds*, in 422 BCE.

return to Athens' glorious past.[19] Comic nostalgia, then, is a serious political accusation against those who run the city in the present day. This new generation of Athenians is depicted as lazy, fatuous, corrupt, and ultimately unfit. And this has much to do with culture: a decline in culture has produced a moral decline, which in turn has proved fatal for the πόλις as a whole. In Aristophanic drama, the war of generations is also, and mostly, a war between different conceptions of education and culture. Both *Clouds* and *Wasps* represent two opposite forms of education fighting against each other: an ἀρχαία παιδεία (*Nub.* 961), the traditional education that brought up the older Athenians and ensured political, military, and social steadfastness, as opposed to a degenerate new παιδεία, brokered by sophists and based upon the immoral and intellectualistic premise that everything is licit for those able to get away with unjust actions. In Aristophanes' view, thus, culture is the ultimate cause for the political decline of the city.

That between fathers and sons, then, is a cultural as well as a social rift. Just like Pennyboy Jr and his friends, Pheidippides and Bdelycleon adhere to a new, sophistic education, based upon the witty ability to use language as an instrument for deceit.[20] Thus, Pheidippides can prove to Strepsiades that beating one's father is an act of generosity, and Bdelycleon can (try to) teach Philocleon how to look hypocritically smart in refined social contexts. In this latter case, Philocleon fiercely opposes Bdelycleon's training by openly boasting of his own ignorance (*Vesp.* 989: κιθαρίζειν γὰρ οὐκ ἐπίσταμαι, "I cannot play the lyre"), a proud claim to be unsophisticated – that is, incompatible with Bdelycleon's new culture.[21] Since any form of intellectual sophistication is depicted as a form of fraud and hypocrisy, the only way to be morally impeccable is to prove deliberately coarse, and for this reason decent and trustworthy. Within this ideological framework, the comic hero's unwillingness to conform to up-to-date cultural standards, and his overt pride in his own illiteracy must be seen as

19 This is the reason why time in Aristophanic drama is circular, and not linear: see Paduano 2007 and Grilli 2020-2021.

20 Bdelycleon's culture must be read as sophistic just as much as Philocleon's: see Morosi 2018, 18-20.

21 On this joke, see Kloss 2001, 224-6; Grilli and Morosi 2023, ch. 2.

completely positive traits: they denounce the hero's belonging to an older, less refined but more morally solid generation. If culture is what Socrates and sophists are teaching, then being ignorant is the only possible revolt. Herein lies, of course, a difference between Jonson and Aristophanes that is not irrelevant: for the latter, the sole possible alternative to false sophistic culture appears to be sheer ignorance; for the former, the alternative to the new trends in the academic and cultural life is a more rigorous form thereof. Unlike Strepsiades and Philocleon, Pennyboy Canter, the father in *The Staple*, is a highly respectable and well-read character. He still fights against an equally dangerous degeneration of culture, but he does so from a remarkably different standpoint. As I intend to argue in a future work, this is certainly due to Jonson's overall social context and cultural position: Jonson was writing for an audience mostly made up of erudites or educated people; he would therefore never challenge culture as a whole (and the social system based thereupon) but limited himself to warning against degenerate forms of that culture.

Differences in culture, of course, correspond with differences in lifestyles, too. Just like Jonson's Pennyboy Jr, whom we meet surrounded by barbers, shoemakers, fashioners, haberdashers, lineners, and hatters in act 1, Pheidippides and Bdelycleon are prone to fatuous and expensive fashions: the former adores horse racing (the reason for the dissipation of Strepsiades' family fortune), while the latter is proficient in frivolous conversation at symposia, and likes lavish clothes. In both *The Staple* and Aristophanes' two plays, such giddy appearance is a clear sign of the characters' adhering to a whole new, and corrupt, idea of culture, as opposed to their fathers' austere and morally incorruptible lifestyle. Before taking him to a symposium, one of his social occasions, Bdelycleon offers his father a new, expensive tunic produced in Persia. Philocleon's reaction is telling (*Vesp.* 1131-49):

Βδ. τὸν τρίβων' ἄφες,
τηνδὶ δὲ χλαῖναν ἀναβαλοῦ τριβωνικῶς.
Φι. ἔπειτα παῖδας χρὴ φυτεύειν καὶ τρέφειν,
ὅθ' οὑτοσί με νῦν ἀποπνῖξαι βούλεται;
Βδ. ἔχ', ἀναβαλοῦ τηνδὶ λαβών, καὶ μὴ λάλει.

ΦΙ. τουτὶ τὸ κακὸν τί ἐστι, πρὸς πάντων θεῶν;
ΒΔ. οἱ μὲν καλοῦσι Περσίδ', οἱ δὲ καυνάκην.
ΦΙ. ἐγὼ δὲ σισύραν ᾠόμην Θυμαιτίδα.
ΒΔ. κοὐ θαῦμά γ'· εἰς Σάρδεις γὰρ οὐκ ἐλήλυθας.
ἔγνως γὰρ ἄν· νῦν δ' οὐχὶ γιγνώσκεις.
ΦΙ. ἐγώ;
μὰ τὸν Δί' οὔτοι νῦν γ'· ἀτὰρ δοκεῖ γέ μοι
ἐοικέναι μάλιστα Μορύχου σάγματι.
ΒΔ. οὔκ, ἀλλ' ἐν Ἐκβατάνοισι ταῦθ' ὑφαίνεται.
ΦΙ. ἐν Ἐκβατάνοισι γίγνεται κρόκης χόλιξ;
ΒΔ. πόθεν, ὦγάθ'; ἀλλὰ τοῦτο τοῖσι βαρβάροις
ὑφαίνεται πολλαῖς δαπάναις. αὕτη γέ τοι
ἐρίων τάλαντον καταπέπωκε ῥᾳδίως.
ΦΙ. οὔκουν ἐριώλην δῆτ' ἐχρῆν αὐτὴν καλεῖν
δικαιότερον ἢ καυνάκην;
(1131-49)

[ΒΔ. Let go of your daft old cloak, and deftly put this warm one on. ΡΗ. Really, why should one produce and rear children, when now this one wants to strangle me? ΒΔ. Here, take this and put it on, and stop chattering. PH. In the name of all the gods, what is this awful thing? ΒΔ. Some people call it a Persian cloak, and others a kaunakes. ΡΗ. I thought it was a sheepskin mantle made at Thymaetadae. ΒΔ. No wonder, you've never been to Sardis. If you had you'd have recognised it; as it is, you don't. ΡΗ. What, me? Well, I certainly don't; but it seems to me to be most like a pot-warmer from Morychus. BD. No no, these are woven in Ecbatana. ΡΗ. In Ecbatana they have woolen sausages? ΒΔ. Really, my good man! No, this is woven by the natives; it's very expensive to make. Why, this garment has swallowed up a talent of wool easily. ΡΗ. In this case shouldn't it properly be called a wool-waster rather than a kaunakes?]

Philocleon is used to much cheaper and more austere cloaks, and is in no way impressed by the costly and exclusive nature of the tunic. On the contrary, he is concerned about the great waste of wool needed to produce it. What is more, the tunic is a Persian manufact, in direct contradiction to Athens' longstanding anti-Persian posture, the same posture that led to Marathon, Salamis, and to some of the highest moments in Athenian recent history. In

other words, Bdelycleon's degenerate culture leads to a degenerate lifestyle which results in an act of political treason.[22]

A cloak is also mentioned in Jonson's *Staple of News*, again as a symbol of the striking difference between fathers and sons. It is Pennyboy Canter's cloak – the lousy, ugly cloak of a beggar, markedly different from Pennyboy Jr's costly and refined attire. Once Canter has revealed his identity and stripped his son of his newly acquired wealth, the cloak can be passed to Pennyboy Jr:

> Canter Farewell, my beggar in velvet, for today;
> (*He points him to his patched cloak thrown off.)*
> Tomorrow you may put on that grave robe
> And enter your great work of Canters' College,
> Your work, and worthy of a chronicle.
> (*SN* 4.4.176-9)

Once again, different cloths symbolise different conditions, and Pennyboy Jr's humiliation is shown as a healthy return to a poorer yet more solid and honest condition.

Interestingly, then, both Aristophanes and Jonson depict a war of generations through the conflictual relationship between a father and a son. Yet more interestingly, the conflict relates specifically to the possession of the family fortune. Since both Jonson's *Staple* and Aristophanes' 'family plays' share a decidedly nostalgic attitude, we are to empathise with the father rather than with the son: the latter's attempt at replacing the former as head of the household is consistently shown as a violent abuse rather than as a natural succession. More precisely, Pheidippides' and Bdelycleon's competition with their respective fathers is clearly depicted as a death impulse – a parricide. This emerges with striking clarity from Pheidippides' assault on his father in *Clouds* (1321 ff.) and is implicit in Bdelycleon's relationship with Philocleon (*Vesp.* 1364-5):

> ὦ οὗτος οὗτος, τυφεδανὲ καὶ χοιρόθλιψ,
> ποθεῖν ἐρᾶν τ' ἔοικας ὡραίας σοροῦ.

22 Mario Telò (2016) has offered a meta-literary reading of this scene, relating Aristophanic comedy here to the meta-literary relationship with Cratinus.

> [Hey, you, you – you demented old twat-rubber! You seem to be lovingly yearning for an attractive young coffin!]

Bdelycleon is accusing his father of being prone to desire in a way that is obviously unnatural for his age: to this aim, he introduces, παρὰ προσδοκίαν, a joke with σορός, coffin – as if to say, 'the only thing you should be longing for at your age is dying'. Bdelycleon's death impulse against his father is clearly perceived by Philocleon, too, who interprets his relationship with his son as eventually lethal to himself. As we have seen, when asked to wear the precious Persian tunic, he fears that his son may want to strangle him *(Vesp.* 1133-4, see above). It should be noted that strangling was also Pheidippides' strategy for killing his own father Strepsiades in *Clouds (*πνίγειν: *Nub.* 1376, 1389; ἀπάγχειν: *Nub.* 1385).

Of course, the desire for one's father's death is intimately related to the eventual possession of the family's fortune, which, according to the order of succession in fifth-century Athens, was due to all male heirs.[23] In Aristophanes' plays, it is clear that the death of one's father was the *conditio sine qua non* to manage the estate and the capital in complete freedom. In other words, it is the desire for the estate that makes succession a death impulse. In *Clouds*, Strepsiades summarises his son's attitude as follows (*Nub.* 837-8): σὺ δὲ / ὥσπερ τεθνεῶτος καταλόει μου τὸν βίον ("you squander my livelihood by washing yourself as if I were dead"). Herein lies, of course, a harsh moral judgement: to prefer money over one's parent's life is described as cynical, cruel, and brutal, the ultimate byproduct of the new, degenerate education. In yet other terms, we may say that linear succession is the social surrogate of, and prelude to, death: resisting linear succession means resisting death, as much as seeking urgently linear succession is a surrogate of, and prelude to, wanting one's predecessor dead.

The possession of the family estate is obviously crucial to *The Staple of News*, as well. As in Aristophanes, Pennyboy Jr's desperate need for his father's fortune is what ultimately defines the whole play's characterology as well as its plot. When we first meet father and son in act 1, Pennyboy Jr's father has allegedly been dead for

23 See e.g. Harrison 1971, vol. 1, esp. 130ff.

just one week. Pennyboy Jr, however, is far from mourning him – he is celebrating his taking over his father's fortunes. He introduces Pennyboy Canter (his father in disguise) as follows:

> This is my founder, this same learnèd canter!
> He brought me the first news of my father's death;
> I thank him, and ever since I call him founder.
> Worship him, boys.
> (*SN* 1.1.18-21)

His father's death is by no means a source of sorrow for Pennyboy Jr – it is the reason why he has finally become rich. Both Aristophanes' family plays and Jonson's *Staple*, then, feature a war between generations as a sign of an epochal cultural change that is seen as dangerous and damaging. Such generational gap is represented by means of a fierce – even violent – competition between father and son for taking control over the family estate.

The similarity is even more significant since it is marked, that is, salient. To be sure, European drama has staged the relationship between fathers and sons, and between elder and younger characters, countless times. However, the most widespread ideological framework in this field is exactly opposite to that of Aristophanes. As has been extensively shown, this has to do with the historical success of a different comic model, the one stemming from Menander's New Comedy and spreading through early modern and modern drama through the fundamental filter of Latin comedy.[24] Frequently, Menandrean and post-Menandrean drama depict succession between an older character and a younger one, as well. However, instead of looking like an act of violence against the older character, succession is shown as a natural process, which confirms and enforces the stability of society, seen as a system that needs to perpetuate itself, and therefore needs its younger members to eventually take over. From a reader-response perspective,[25] while

24 See e.g. Konstan 1995; Lape 2001; Lape, Moreno 2014; Grilli 2020-2021. Of course, Latin (and particularly Plautine) comedy was pivotal to spread plots and ideas from New Comedy through early modern and modern Europe: see e.g. Hardin 2018.

25 By 'reader-response' I mean here the critical theory first developed

Aristophanic comedy urges its audience to empathise completely with the older generation (whom we see as victims of a brutal aggression against their own prerogatives, and against their own life), Menandrean comedy urges us to empathise with the younger characters. In this latter case, the older generation's resistance to succession is not depicted as a necessary fight to preserve their dignity anymore, but rather as an unnatural and ultimately fruitless opposition to the normal dynamics implied by linear time. This unambiguously positive interpretation of succession not only orients our sympathy towards one of the two characters involved in the conflict, but shapes the whole ideology developed around the theme of the war between generations.[26] Our undivided sympathy must be given to the new generation and its members, now shown as the victims of a deviant repression against their legitimate desire for succession. Such general desire impacts on two fundamental fields – love and money. Not surprisingly, the older character, depicted as grotesquely prone to desires that should be suppressed at his age, is also frequently depicted as greedy and avaricious: his resistance against linear succession is effectively represented as an opposition to the younger characters' wedding and as a form of avarice (see, for instance, Euclio in Plautus's *Aulularia*).[27] The comic

by Iser 1972 and 1978, who suggested that the literary analysis of any text should also take the pragmatic effects of that given text on its audience or readership in due consideration.

26 The ideological consequences of Menandrean and post-Menandrean war of generations are far-reaching. As Alessandro Grilli summarises (2020-2021, 187), *gamos* in Menander and in New Comedy emphasises the 'natural' development of a young man along the prescriptions of social norms. In reader-response terms, we may say that while the aesthetic effect of Aristophanic comedy is to push the spectators to desire the overthrow of the *status quo* in the name of the individual's irrepressible needs, the effect of the *nea* is to push the spectators to conform to the very forms of repression of individual desires.

27 One may also think of Aristotle's observations on avidity in *Politics* 1 (1257b40-1258a1): the desire for unlimited wealth depends on men's anxiety (σπουδάζειν) over living. In other words, boundless greed is an implicit desire for an unlimited life. Thus, there is an intimate connection between accumulation of wealth and resistance against death and its surrogate, succession. Interestingly enough, the only relevant case in Aristophanic

mechanism of *The Staple* (on which more below) matches exactly those two features – avarice and sexual desire – by means of the allegory of Lady Pecunia: being greedy for money, as Pennyboy Sr is, means coveting the young personification of wealth.[28] Both being greedy and coveting a young woman are comic representations of the old character's resistance against succession.

Against this background, Jonson's decision to problematise Pennyboy Jr's position in *The Staple of News* to such an extent as to direct our empathy towards Pennyboy Canter looks peculiar to say the least. This seems to me the dramatic consequence of an altogether Aristophanic stance – not so much a 'reading', or an adaptation, of a precise text or pericope, but rather a more general, and at the same time much deeper, understanding of the basic dynamics of Aristophanic comedy, and specifically Aristophanic plays on family.

The picture, however, is even more complex – which also shows us the relevance of a systemic approach to intertextuality, one that could allow for the interaction of competing, sometimes even opposed, models. As a matter of fact, while accepting Aristophanes' peculiar interpretation of the father-son relationship, *The Staple of News* does not renounce a feature which, as we have seen, is derived from Menandrean drama – the romantic plot. In other words, whereas we are to follow the (Aristophanic) conflict between Pennyboy Jr and his father, we are *also* to follow Pennyboy Jr's (Menandrean) hard-won courtship of young and beautiful Lady Pecunia. This second comic line is by all accounts consistent with Menandrean drama: two young characters love each other, and want to get married; their righteous desire, however, is opposed by an old, greedy character, who makes every effort to obstruct the happy ending. As it should now be evident, these two plot lines – the father's blameless fight

drama where we sympathise with a younger character who is due to inherit his father's estate and thus marry a beautiful girl is an old character rejuvenated: in a memorable scene towards the finale of *Wasps* (esp. *Vesp.* 1351-9), Philocleon acts as if he were Bdeycleon's son instead of his father.

28 This, of course, may also be related to cases, quite frequent indeed in modern comedy, of characters who try to marry into property: see e.g. the fight between Subtle and Face to have Dame Pliant, Kastrill's rich, widowed sister in Jonson's *Volpone* (esp. 4.3).

against his debauched son, and the son's equally blameless fight against the old antagonist for his beloved's hand – are antipodes, and logically incompatible. Yet Jonson finds a brilliant way to make those lines compatible: he reduplicates the older character. While the new generation is represented by Pennyboy Jr alone, the older generation is represented by two characters – actually, two brothers, Pennyboy Canter (Pennyboy Jr's father) and Pennyboy Sr (Pennyboy Jr's uncle). Each of the two brothers is linked with one of the two plot lines: the father is related to the 'Aristophanic' plot line and is therefore designed to arouse the audience's sympathy at the expense of his son; the uncle, instead, is related to the 'Menandrean' plot line, and is thus depicted as a greedy and violent old man (a usurer) and must arouse the audience's repulsion to the advantage of his nephew. Pennyboy Sr, then, will usefully play the part of the antagonist in the romantic plot derived from New Comedy: his avarice is decidedly morally negative, and, as we have seen, the allegory of wealth as a young Princess transforms greed for money in sexual desire. Thus, Pennyboy Jr's fight for linear succession is both positive – insofar as it targets the greedy old kidnapper of Lady Pecunia – and negative – insofar as it targets the respectable Canter. This twofold representation of Pennyboy Jr depends on the antithetical reduplication of his older counterparts, which in turn shows a double ideologic and dramatic origin: from Old *and* New Comedy.

Again, this does not at all imply any explicit or implicit intertextual reference to specific passages from Aristophanes or from Plautus and Terence, although of course we can say that Jonson knew, with different degrees of precision, those *corpora*. What we are observing here is rather the influx of a deeper literary relationship, one that goes well beyond single textual tiles, and could even be inadvertent. This may certainly be the case with post-Menandrean plots and ideology: the romantic plot and its implicit ideology were already so widespread in early modern drama that their presence here is certainly unmarked – which also makes it impossible to say whether Jonson was using a romantic plot to draw purposedly attention on the connection between *The Staple* and its ancient model.[29] On the

29 Loewenstein, for instance, suggests a reference to Plautus' *Aulularia*, a play from which Jonson drew heavily while composing *The Case Is Altered*.

other hand, the case with Aristophanes looks to me significantly different: since the conflict between father and son as it is staged in Aristophanic plays is far less frequent in subsequent drama (in fact it was supplanted by the Menandrean version), it seems to me that we can be a little bolder and reach the conclusion that in staging that particular form of the generational conflict Jonson was somehow influenced by his reading of Aristophanes. We do not need to think of any specific hypotext; rather, we may speak of an 'interpretative model', that is, the mental image that Jonson had formed of Aristophanic drama, in terms of broad dynamics and comic strategies. From this model Jonson was drawing.

My hypothesis, then, is that Jonson designed a play structured as a common romantic comedy, and that, under the influence of his Aristophanic mental model, he expanded that structure to include another, comparatively far more uncommon, plot line. Of course, this Aristophanic feature was reshaped according to early modern aesthetic canons: the clash between father and son is narrated through an exchange of identities, a comical device that was by no means common in Aristophanic drama but was extremely pervasive in subsequent ancient comic drama (Menander, and Latin comedy), from which it would spread through early modern and modern comedy. Such is Jonson's use of ancient models in *The Staple of News*: not so much a textual relationship, confined to single passages, but rather a structural appropriation of mental models of ancient texts, which were then intertwined with other ancient models, and with modern and more common dramatic techniques.

3.

Ideology is not the only field where we can observe striking similarities between Jonson's *Staple* and Aristophanic comedies. As mentioned above, the commodification of knowledge produces interesting correspondences also in terms of how the dramatic action is structured.

However, the references in *The Staple* are altogether too scant to lead us to believe that the whole structure of the romantic plot was derived from that specific comedy.

Frequently, Aristophanic plots are based on the exclusive possession of goods: in *Acharnians*, for instance, Dicaeopolis opens a new market and becomes outrageously, even infinitely, rich – a fortune which he won't share with anybody else in Athens. This general condition (the exclusive possession of wealth, and the refusal to share it) has a clear dramatic realisation: Dicaeopolis barricades his own house to prevent external visitors to enter. In a sequence of similar scenes, a visitor asks to be let into Dicaeopolis' house (that is, to have a share of his wealth), and is almost invariably shooed away by the comic hero (that is, the hero refuses to share his wealth). In other terms, Aristophanes structures a significant part of the dramatic action as a clear-cut opposition between two spaces (inside *vs* outside), which represent inclusion and exclusion respectively. This dramatic metaphor is described by Aristophanes himself in *Ecclesiazusae* (*Ecc.* 418-21):

> ὅσοις δὲ κλίνη μή 'στι μηδὲ στρώματα,
> ἰέναι καθευδήσοντας ἀπονενιμμένους
> εἰς τῶν σκυλοδεψῶν· ἢν δ' ἀποκλῄῃ τῇ θύρᾳ
> χειμῶνος ὄντος, τρεῖς σισύρας ὀφειλέτω.
>
> [And all those who don't have a bed or bedding should be allowed, after washing their hands, to go to the tanners' houses to sleep; and if the tanner shuts the door against them in winter, let him be fined three fleecy blankets.]

Likewise, in Aristophanes' *Clouds*, Socrates' exclusive possession of knowledge is shown by means of a distinction between inside and outside. This is what prompts the creation of the φροντιστήριον, Socrates' and the sophists' house, where knowledge is kept secret, instead of being shared with everybody. The commodification of knowledge allows for its exclusive possession, and its exclusive possession allows for a kind of dramatic action that entails the creation of an exclusive space where knowledge – now made an exclusive, and tradable, commodity – can be kept. The Thinkery is thus pivotal to the whole action: without it, no exclusive possession of knowledge would be possible, and most of the play would not exist.

Of course, Socrates' Thinkery is clearly paralleled by the Staple of news founded by Cymbal in Jonson's play.[30] Just like the *Clouds*, in *The Staple of News* the commodification of knowledge entails the existence of a specific place where knowledge (in the form of news) can be kept and traded. And just like the *Clouds*, the physical nature of the staple is fundamental to the whole functioning of the drama. The brokering function of the Staple, which collects and redistributes news, requires a centralised market, that is, a physical space where the trading takes place. Since information is described as the result of the activity of informants, pieces of news are depicted as physical entities, which need to be physically brought into the same place, and sold from there.

Thus, although the play is meant as a parody of emerging historical trends, the Staple is not a historically existing place: obviously, in 1626 there was no such thing as a market for news. Rather, we may call the Staple a symbolic space – that is, a space created within the drama to serve as a powerful symbol for the basic dynamics of the drama itself. In other words, the Staple is the result of how the action develops: since Jonson's aim is to parody the immoral commodification of information, he depicts an actual trade thereof: to this aim, he invents a space, the Staple, to represent that whole action. This peculiar nature of the Staple finds a striking parallel in Aristophanes' Thinkery. Just like the Staple, the φροντιστήριον was no historically existing building, or institution – in fact, it was not even a parody of anything remotely comparable. Philosophical schools such as Antisthenes' and Isocrates' – the closest, although not identical, parallels to the Thinkery – would be founded at the earliest at the beginning of fourth century BCE, that is, some twenty or thirty years *after* Aristophanes' *Clouds*.[31] The φροντιστήριον in Aristophanes' *Clouds*, then, is nothing but a symbolic space, designed to represent dramatically and visually Socrates' exclusive possession of knowledge.

30 The parallel was already observed by Steggle 2007, 62. However, Steggle's observation looks somewhat formalistic: "Both [plays] present scenes in which a novice enters the lair of a trickster and conjurer, whose particular specialty lies in offering a whole raft of new and strange ideas". On the contrary, I would contend that the parallel shows a much deeper similarity in the dramatic structure of both plays.

31 See e.g. Lynch 1972, pp. 32-67; Ostwald, Lynch 1994; Vegetti 2016.

Moreover, this symbolic space is described as an actual institution, that is, as an established organisation such as a school or an office. That is not historically true, either. Neither the Thinkery nor the Staple were existing institutions: there was no such thing as Socrates' 'school' in fifth-century Athens[32] or a market where to sell and buy information in early modern England. Both Aristophanes' *Clouds* and Jonson's *Staple*, then, present us with a slight but significant misrepresentation. This depends on a first-level misrepresentation, that is, on the dramatic creation of a symbolic space: the drama being structured around a fictional place meant to be instantly recognisable for its peculiar traits, those who live or work in that place will look just as peculiar. Of course, the institutionalisation of intellectual activities (activities which are clearly to be thought as deceitful) gives voice to Aristophanes' and Jonson's most pressing theme in *Clouds* and *The Staple* – the dangerous modernisation of culture and morals. Such historical and social transformation is not shown as the result of a long-term process by the two dramatists. Rather, it is paranoically depicted as the specific product of the wicked actions carried out by a specific group of people – an institution made of rascals: Socrates and his acolytes in *Clouds*, Nathaniel Butter and the first publishers working at corantos in *The Staple*.[33] By so doing, of course, both dramas overrate the role played by the single κωμῳδούμενοι in complex socio-cultural phenomena. Yet, they offer an easier verdict, which is both psychologically and dramatically more effective. On the one hand, pointing at one specific culprit

32 As is well known from our sources, Socrates liked having random talks with anyone interested, and he usually did so in the open, in crowded places. This was a substantial feature of Socratism, and Socrates' most prominent choice.

33 Whereas in *Clouds* the Thinkery is the only representation of knavery institutionalised, in Jonson's play the Staple is just one realization thereof: Pennyboy Jr's Canters' College (act 4) is another instance, and just like the Staple it can have physical entity: ". . . A seat / Is built already, furnished too, worth twenty / Of your imagined structures, Canters' College" (4.4.124-6). Moreover, at the beginning of act 5, Pennyboy Jr. speaks of canters and rascals as if they were an affiliated club: "the *comitia* of the canters" (5.1.4). Of course, this is both a metaphor and a paradox, but one that proves Jonson's tendency to think of fraudulent intellectuals in terms of an organisation.

or better still at an obnoxious and often mysterious organisation is a typical reaction to profound transformations that we view with concern. On the other hand, drama requires clear and unambiguous actions, carried out by distinct characters: century-long social transformations do not make good drama; specific, definite, and unique actions, performed by easily recognisable characters, do.

In light of this, it is not surprising that the liberating finale of both plays consists in the disbanding of the nefarious organisations staged in each comedy. In dramatic terms, this amounts to the physical elimination of the places hosting those organisations: both Socrates' Thinkery and Jonson's Staple end up being violently dissolved. Famously, Socrates' φροντιστήριον is burnt down by Strepsiades; likewise, the Staple and its workers are "blown up":

> Thomas Our Staple is all to pieces, quite dissolved!
> Pennyboy Jr Ha?
> Thomas Shivered as in an earthquake! Heard you not
> The crack and ruins? We are all blown up!
> Soon as they heard th'Infanta was got from them,
> Whom they had so devoured i'their hopes
> To be their patroness and sojourn with 'em,
> Our emissaries, register, examiner
> Flew into vapour; our grave governor
> Into a subtler air, and is returned,
> As we do hear, grand captain of the Jeerers.
> I and my fellow melted into butter
> And spoiled our ink, and so the office vanished.
> (*SN* 5.1.39-50)

Again, this feature does not just show formal similarities between the two texts, but points to a more significant dramatic coincidence. In fact, in strictly formal terms the two scenes look rather different, although superficially comparable. Strepsiades' setting fire to the Thinkery in *Clouds* is a deliberate and violent act, which entails the actual burning down of the whole place and the death of those living within. The dissolving of the Staple, instead, is described by means of a simile ("*as* in an earthquake", 40), and amounts to a great metaphor. Even when Jonson makes use of apparently literal imagery ("flew into vapour", 46; "melted into butter", 49), this is clearly unrealistic,

and suggests an altogether figurative understanding of the whole passage. While formally divergent, however, the two scenes share a coincident dramatic value: since both plays stage obnoxious organisations attacking morals and culture, the only possible happy ending consists not just in the protagonist's redemption, but also in the dissolution of those organisations. Moreover, since those organisations have been consistently represented through the place that hosts them, their dissolution will be represented as the destruction of that place.[34]

On this subject, one more observation may be added about the substantial difference between how the *Clouds* and *The Staple* show the dissolution of the respective buildings. As is well known, the finale of *Clouds* is most peculiar. In fact, the scene is unique: although violence is certainly tolerated by ancient comedy, death and killing are extremely rare. Strepsiades' fire in the Thinkery, then, is highly problematic, both in relation to the extant Aristophanic *corpus* and from a moral perspective. I would suggest that the difference between how Aristophanes and Jonson handle this subject testifies to their differing ideological approaches to culture.[35] As we have seen above, in Aristophanes' view the only alternative to Socrates' deceiving culture is sheer ignorance, that is, no culture at all. In this respect, Jonson's perspective is radically different: he drew a line between two forms of culture – official culture, vouched for by actual academic institutions and peers, and fake culture, produced by rascals (as in the case of *The Staple*, or *The Alchemist*) or by incompetents (as in the case of *Poetaster*). The fight against this latter, degenerate form of culture does not entail at all the indiscriminate destruction of culture

34 Another such case is the destruction of Subtle's alchemical laboratory in *The Alchemist* (4.5). The (deceiving) worth of Subtle's work has been represented as the physical place where he is producing his fake philosopher's stone: the liberating failure of his con operation is thus represented by the wrecking of that very place.

35 Of course, Jonson's choice will have also depended upon the harsh judgement expressed on the fire in the Thinkery through the ages (the treatment of Socrates in *Clouds* is by far the most problematic point in Aristophanic reception in early modern Europe: see Miola 2014, esp. 489-92). In this respect, Jonson's lighter version of the dissolution of the Staple is certainly much more compliant with the spirit of comedy.

as a whole. On the contrary, it is meant exactly to preserve true, unadulterated, and authorised versions of culture. It is for this reason, I believe, that Aristophanes can conceive an utter destruction of the Thinkery, as a violent, angry reaction against all kinds of culture, whereas Jonson cannot.[36]

Although it is perhaps the most relevant, the physical nature of the Thinkery and the Staple is not the only remarkable correspondence between Aristophanes' and Jonson's dramatic techniques. There is yet another field where, I would contend, Jonson seems clearly to have learnt a significant lesson from his Greek predecessor. When they finally get to the hero's house, Chremylus and Wealth engage in the following dialogue (Aristoph. *Pl.* 230-44):

Χρ. σὺ δ', ὦ κράτιστε Πλοῦτε πάντων δαιμόνων,
εἴσω μετ' ἐμοῦ δεῦρ' εἴσιθ'· ἡ γὰρ οἰκία
αὕτη 'στὶν ἣν δεῖ χρημάτων σε τήμερον
μεστὴν ποιῆσαι καὶ δικαίως κἀδίκως.
Πλ. ἀλλ' ἄχθομαι μὲν εἰσιὼν νὴ τοὺς θεούς
εἰς οἰκίαν ἑκάστοτ' ἀλλοτρίαν πάνυ·
ἀγαθὸν γὰρ ἀπέλαυσ' οὐδὲν αὐτοῦ πώποτε.
ἢν μὲν γὰρ ὡς φειδωλὸν εἰσελθὼν τύχω,
εὐθὺς κατώρυξέν με κατὰ τῆς γῆς κάτω·
κἄν τις προσέλθῃ χρηστὸς ἄνθρωπος φίλος
αἰτῶν λαβεῖν τι μικρὸν ἀργυρίδιον,
ἔξαρνός ἐστι μηδ' ἰδεῖν με πώποτε.
ἢν δ' ὡς παραπλῆγ' ἄνθρωπον εἰσελθὼν τύχω,
πόρναισι καὶ κύβοισι παραβεβλημένος
γυμνὸς θύραζ' ἐξέπεσον ἐν ἀκαρεῖ χρόνῳ.
(230-44)

36 As regards the dissolution of the deceitful organisations in the two plays, we can observe yet another relevant difference between Strepsiades and Pennyboy Canter. In Jonson's comedy, the dissolution of the Staple is subsequent to Canter's punishing of his son; on the other hand, in *Clouds* Strepsiades sets fire to the Thinkery out of frustration for having been deceived by the Clouds and beaten by his own son. In other terms, whereas in *Clouds* Strepsiades' failure as a father consists in the complete loss of his authority, in Jonson's play the father, however temporarily divested of his authority, still has the strength to repress, and is able to use it before it gets too late.

> [Ch. And now, Wealth, most powerful of all divinities, come inside here with me; because this is the house which today, by fair means or foul, you've got to fill full of good things. We. Well, I'm always very reluctant, by the gods, to go into anyone else's house, because I've never yet had any good come to me from doing so. If I happen to have entered the home of a miserly man, he straight away buries me down under ground; and then if a decent person, a friend of his, comes to him asking to borrow some small little sum of money, he denies ever having seen me in his life. Or if I happen to have entered the home of a mad profligate, I get thrown around on whoring and dicing till in next to no time I'm cast naked out of the door.]

Having portrayed wealth by means of an allegorical personification, Aristophanes can describe the possession of money in terms of the physical detention of Wealth. In so doing, he appears to be in keeping with ancient Greek thought and poetry, which frequently represented wealth and poverty as gods who literally visited one's house.[37] In the Homeric hymn to Demetra, for instance, among the several benefits offered by the two goddesses, the poet lists the sending of Wealth to their worshippers' houses (*h. Hom.* 2.488-9):

> αἶψα δέ οἱ πέμπουσιν ἐφέστιον ἐς μέγα δῶμα
> Πλοῦτον, ὃς ἀνθρώποις ἄφενος θνητοῖσι δίδωσιν.
>
> [They soon send Wealth to lodge in his mansion, the god who bestows affluence on mortals.][38]

Since Wealth is thought of as a god – that is, as an entity with a physical stance – being rich means being visited by Wealth. Of course, this general trait has an interesting result in Aristophanes: thinking of Wealth as an individual inevitably entails thinking of wealth as exclusive. Although a god, Wealth cannot be in two places at one time: that is why the physical detention of Wealth is a powerful symbol for the exclusive possession of riches. This symbolic mechanism is pivotal to the whole structure of *Wealth*:

37 See West in Hesiod 1966, *ad Th.* 593; Richardson in Homeric Hymns 1979², *ad h. Hom.* 2.488f.

38 The text and translation of Homeric hymns are those by M.L. West (Homeric Hymns 2003).

although he intends to share wealth with whoever will prove to be just, Chremylus holds Wealth in his own house; therefore, those who want a share in the hero's fortune, must come to Chremylus' door. This is highly convenient from a dramatic point of view: the sharing of wealth is staged as an actual visit to Wealth, in Chremylus' house. This replicates the typical plot of Aristophanic comedy (for which see above): a long sequence of people asking to be let into the hero's house.

This whole mechanism involving the physical nature of wealth and its allegorical personification is perfectly clear to Ben Jonson, who uses it with great frequency and absolute consistency in *The Staple of News*. In several *loci*, the exclusive possession of wealth is represented as the physical detention of Lady Pecunia. Just as in Aristophanes, becoming rich depends upon Lady Pecunia taking up residence at one's house: "Lickfinger How much 'twere better that My Lady's Grace / Would here take up, sir, and keep house with you (*SN* 4.2.163-4)".

Before residing at Pennyboy Jr's, Lady Pecunia was obliged to dwell at the house of Pennyboy Sr:

> Pennyboy Jr How now, old uncle? I am come to see thee
> And the brave lady here, the daughter of Ophir,
> They say thou keep'st.
> (*SN* 2.5.1-3)

However, Lady Pecunia does not seem particularly satisfied with her accommodation:

> Pennyboy Jr The truth is, uncle, that Her Grace dislikes
> Her entertainment, specially her lodging.
> Pecunia Nay, say her jail. Never unfortunate princess
> Was used so by a jailer.
> (*SN* 4.3.28-31)

Lodging, of course, is a metaphor: to say that the personification of wealth is badly lodged amounts to saying that money is used badly. In particular, the imprisonment of Lady Pecunia is a spatial metaphor for avarice. Not spending any money is equivalent to keeping money (and its incarnation) in custody:

PECUNIA Band, you can tell, and Statute, how he has used me,
Kept me close prisoner, under twenty bolts –
STATUTE And forty padlocks –
BAND All malicious engines
A wicked smith could forge out of his iron,
As locks and keys, shackles and manacles,
To torture a great lady.
(*SN* 4.3.32-7)

Coherently, prodigality is shown as freedom to move granted to Pecunia:

MADRIGAL Who'd lie in a room, with a close-stool and garlic,
And kennel with his dogs, that had a prince
Like this young Pennyboy to sojourn with?
SHUNFIELD He'll let you ha' your liberty –
ALMANAC Go forth
Whither you please, and to what company –
MADRIGAL Scatter yourself amongst us . . .
(*SN* 4.2.174-9)

The Jeerers' interest in Lady Pecunia's freedom, of course, is self-serving: letting her move freely – so that she can visit them – means sharing Pennyboy Jr's fortune. This much was clear to Cymbal, as well. When asking Pennyboy Sr for funding he uses the familiar metaphor of Pecunia's residence:

CYMBAL Or, if it please you, sir, to let her sojourn
In part with me, I have a moiety
We will divide, half of the profits.
(*SN* 3.4.26-8)

I contend that this metaphorical and dramatic representation clearly derives from Aristophanes, too. This emerges even more plainly from a key scene in act 2, set at the door of Pennyboy Sr's house. In scene 4, we finally meet the Jeerers, who are paying a visit to the old miser. Of course, their visit has evident egoistic aims:

FITTON How now, old money-bawd? We're come –
PENNYBOY JR To jeer me,
As you were wont. I know you.

Almanac No, to give thee
Some good security, and see Pecunia.
Pennyboy Jr What is't?
Fitton Ourselves.
Almanca We'll be one bound for another.
Fitton [*Indicating Almanac*] This noble doctor here.
Almanac [*Indicating Fitton*] This worthy courtier.
Fitton [*Indicating Shunfield*] This man o'war, he was our muster-master.
Almanac But a sea-captain now, brave Captain Shunfield.
(*SN* 2.4.1-7)

The scene is conceived exactly like any of the scenes featuring ἀλαζόνες (pests) visiting the comic hero's house in the last part of almost all extant Aristophanic plays. As we have seen above, according to the usual symbolic structure of Aristophanic drama, the hero's house represents the hero's newly acquired privilege: thus, trying to enter his house is equivalent to wanting a share of that privilege. Often, each visitor offers a service in exchange: in *Birds*, for instance, after founding his new city, Peisetairos is visited by a priest, who offers to perform the initial sacrifices (Aristoph. *Av.* 860-94); by a poet, who offers to compose a poem in honour of the new city (*Av.* 904-52); by an oracle monger, who offers to sell oracles on the future of Cloudcuckooland (*Av.* 959-91); by a geometer, who offers to measure the land (*Av.* 992-1019); and by a decree-seller, who offers to write the city's constitution (*Av.* 1035-57). The result never changes: each visitor is shooed away by Peisetairos, a dramatic symbol for the hero's refusal to share his privilege. This is due, of course, to the evident deceiving nature of each of those offers: obviously, the ἀλαζόνες do not mean to provide the hero with valuable services but are hypocritically covering their only motive – getting a share of the hero's fortune. For this reason, visitors are sometimes depicted as offering fake services, that is, services that are only an excuse to be let into the hero's house. One clear example is provided by Hermes in *Wealth* (esp. 1151-70): in a hilarious dialogue with Cario, the god offers a number of services under five of his several cult-titles, eventually prompting Cario's comment (*Pl.* 1164) ὡς ἀγαθόν ἐστ' ἐπωνυμίας πολλὰς ἔχειν

("What a good thing it is to have lots of titles!"). Evidently, then, those services were just a pretext to be admitted to a wealthy house.

This is exactly what happens in act 2 of *The Staple of News*. To start with, the Jeerers are comparable to Aristophanes' ἀλαζόνες in all respects: they are uninvited, egoistic, and fraudulent visitors, imposters whose only aim is to make money by circumventing a rich character ("see Pecunia", 2.4.3). Just like Aristophanes' ἀλαζόνες, Jonson's Jeerers are highly insincere, offering Pennyboy Sr a service – each of them makes himself useful based on his respective 'competence'. However, that 'competence' is clearly jury-rigged, as Pennyboy Canter will extensively show at 4.4.150ff. The introduction of Shunfield (2.4.6-7) shows plainly that the offering of services is a silly makeshift: although being a "man o'war", he has now remade himself as a sea captain – just like Hermes in *Wealth*, it is sufficient to be conferred a new title to prove able to carry out a specific duty.

This depiction produces a strikingly similar dramatic situation: a scene at the door, with a clear-cut symbolic distinction between an inside and an outside space, representing wealth *vs* poverty, inclusion *vs* exclusion.[39] Such clear-cut distinction involves characterology, as well. Like Aristophanes, Jonson creates an evident, and brutal, difference between a privileged character – who has everything – and his wretched visitors – who have nothing:

> Pennyboy Jr You all have happy memories, gentlemen,
> In rocking my poor cradle. I remember, too,
> When you had lands, and credit, worship, friends,
> Ay, and could give security. Now you have none,
> Or will have none right shortly. This can time,
> And the vicissitude of things. I have
> All these, and money too, and do possess 'em,
> And am right heartily glad of all our memories,
> And both the changes.
> (*SN* 2.4.182-90)

39 On such symbolic use of space in Aristophanic drama, see Morosi 2021. On the vital role of the door in Aristophanic drama, see also Poe 1999 and Giovannelli 2011.

In light of this situation, the Jeerers-ἀλαζόνες want to be let into the rich character's house – which both in Aristophanes and in Jonson represents, by means of the physical presence of the allegory of wealth, the character's fortune –, and to this aim fake competences that they do not have. Standing on their houses' thresholds, however, the Aristophanic hero and Jonson's miser are not easily impressed. Just like Peisetairos in *Birds*, Pennyboy Sr does not fall into the Jeerers' trap:

> Pennyboy Sr I do not love pickled security.[40]
> Would I had one good fresh-man in for all,
> For truth is, you three stink.
> Shunfield You are a rogue.
> Pennyboy Sr I think I am, but I will lend no money
> On that security, captain.
> (*SN* 2.4.11-5)

Like any Aristophanic hero, Pennyboy Sr debunks the imposters' pretexts, and goes straight to the point: "I will lend no money". The refusal to lend money, of course, is represented as an expulsion from Pennyboy's house – another evident Aristophanic trait: "Pennyboy Sr Are not these flies gone yet? – Pray, quit my house. / I'll smoke you out else (*SN* 2.4.165-6)".

Then, the long scene (running for more than 200 lines) presents us with typical Aristophanic dynamics: the αλαζόνες laying siege to the comic hero's house, and this latter's stubborn resistance against any attempt at entry. The only difference between Jonson's scene and his model is that instead of bringing the imposters in one by one, Jonson has them come onstage all together. In dramatic terms, however, the effect is the same: a prolonged, incessant sequence of pests, and their likewise relentless expulsion.

This much is sufficient to reach some conclusions on Jonson's 'intertextual' strategy regarding Aristophanes. Thus far, we have still not met any specific reference to single passages quoted, translated, or adapted from Aristophanic plays. However, I hope to have shown beyond reasonable doubt that *The Staple of News*

40 Pennyboy Sr is answering Almanac's remark on Shunfield credit as a sailor (*SN* 2.4.10: "And seasoned, too, since he took salt at sea").

contains unmistakable signs of Jonson's in-depth reading of Aristophanes. Such signs point towards a structural interaction between the two *corpora*, concerning both ideology and drama. I call it 'structural' to account for its ability to influence the structure itself of Jonson's play (or better some parts of Jonson's play), its themes, and its dramatic technique. This goes well beyond episodic quotations, and seems to show a fascinating process of definition of a common language, both in terms of themes and in terms of their dramatic representation through the comic action. Some of the salient aspects of the thematic and dramatic shape of *The Staple of News* seem to derive from a peculiar reading of Aristophanes – not just of one single play, but of more plays. Instead of referring to single texts or scenes, Jonson forms a more general picture of Aristophanic comedy, its main strategies, its dramatic dynamics, and its general ideology. In other words, Jonson deduces from single Aristophanic plays a general, theoretical model on how Aristophanic drama works. It is that model, and not specific *loci*, that Jonson remembers and reframes. This is the work of both a playwright and an interpreter.

I believe, however, that we can add one more observation on act 2, scene 4, that may help us clarify further this picture. When asked to at least lend some money, Pennyboy Sr – who detains Lady Pecunia in his house – insists that he is utterly poor: "I ha' no money, gentlemen; / An he go to't in rhyme once, not a penny." (2.4.22-3); "I have no money, gentlemen" (2.4.58). This is an outright lie, which Pennyboy Sr himself will contradict in a matter of few lines (see e.g. 68-70). However, this detail reminds us of the passage from *Wealth* quoted above (*supra*, 249-50), where Wealth complains about the treatment that he receives from miserly men (esp. Aristoph. *Pl.* 237-41). The situation described by Wealth is strikingly similar to that which we see enacted in *SN* 2.4: after having carefully hidden the personification of wealth inside his own house, a miserly man receives the visit of a friend asking to borrow some money; the miser, then, states falsely to have never in his life seen Wealth and shoos the friend away from his house. This is exactly what happens in *SN* 2.4, where a miser (Pennyboy Sr) is visited by some people asking for money, denies being wealthy, and eventually shoos his visitors away. How are we to explain this

coincidence? To be sure, in *Pl.* 237-41 Aristophanes is describing in words a situation that he has frequently shown as an action in several plays. Thus, Jonson's reshaping of that situation may well derive simply from his observation of the typical Aristophanic dramatic pattern, and not from his reading of the specific passage from *Wealth*. However, a couple of elements seem to suggest that a closer relationship may exist, after all. First, Aristophanes mentions explicitly the miser – a kind of character notoriously destined to a long-lasting fortune in European drama, but conspicuously absent from Aristophanic extant plays. Second, both the miser in Wealth's account and Pennyboy Sr in Jonson's play do lie about their not having seen money at all, a small touch that is obviously in character but is somehow not necessary, especially in *The Staple*, where, as we have seen, it is surprisingly contradicted by the miser himself. It is just possible, then, that in addition to his structural reception of Aristophanic themes and techniques Jonson may have gone here one step further: having read this passage from *Wealth* (a passage that we know virtually for sure he must have read, since it is next to the aretalogy of Wealth to which Jonson refers at 2.1.31-44), Jonson may have decided to transform this little sketch told by Wealth into an actual scene, expanding its comic potential through the introduction of the Jeerers. Interestingly, we have at least one parallel for Jonson's dramatising an anecdote that he had found in an ancient source: in *Poetaster* 3.1, he dramatises Horace's well-known satire on the incompetent would-be poet (*Serm.* 1.9), by creating a whole new scene clearly based on Horace's account.[41]

Be that as it may, Aristophanes' presence in *The Staple of News* looks to me both more pervasive and more structurally decisive than Aristophanic and Jonsonian scholarship have yet noticed. Scholars have instead focussed on intertextual parallels and elaborations, that are far less widespread and conclusive. As important as they may be as evidence of contact between hypertext and hypotext, *verbatim* loans or textual allusions fall short when it comes to the more general theme of literary modelling, a theme that has proved decisive to the understanding of the relationships between

41 On this remarkable scene and on Jonson's intertextual strategy, see e.g. Moul 2006 and 2010.

ancient and early modern literatures. Jonson's literary modelling of Aristophanes in *The Staple* testifies to the strong influence exerted by Aristophanic comedy on Jonson's late production, perhaps suggesting that we should date an extensive, close reading of ancient comedy around the last two or three decades of Jonson's life. We should at least observe a remarkable difference between Jonson's use of Aristophanic drama in earlier plays and his literary exploitation of Aristophanic material in *The Staple*, which involves a wide-ranging, in-depth reshaping of whole structures and themes.

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