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The Cloaks of The Devil is an Asse

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Among the titles of Ben Jonson’s plays, that of The Devil is an Asse is something of an anomaly. Jonson’s titles fall naturally into classes: the names of persons, as Sejanus, Volpone; designations of individuals, which may be extended metaphorically to many members of the cast, as The Alchemist; qualified substantives, as Every Man in His Humour, Every Man out of His Humour and The Staple of News; only two, The Case is Altered and The Devil is an Asse are asseverations. The promise of The Case is Altered is fulfilled, for at the end of the play almost every one finds himself in changed circumstances, and Jonson notes the changes by repetition of the words of the title.

When, however, one is confronted by the bold assertion of the title The Devil is an Asse, he expects a movement that will substantiate the charge. And such a contention about Satan would have been a most difficult one to establish before a Jacobean audience which, according to Jonson, in his Prologue, has for its “deare delight, the Diuell of Edmundon,” and which may well have heard of the “one devell too many amongst them,” at a performance of Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus.1 Jonson’s proof of the immediate and literal statement is quickly evident. Old Iniquity, by his own statement of his qualifications, by the antiquated meter in which he states them, and by the judgment of the Great Devil, qualifies as an ass. Pug’s utter incompetence to conduct on Earth the affairs of Hell is quickly demonstrated by his utter inferiority in vice to the denizens of London. And, in view of his sending such an emissary, the judgment of the Great Devil himself is brought gravely into question. In fact, “a Boy o’ thirteene yeere old made him an Asse/But t’other day” (V,v,50).2

2 C. H. Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson, Ben Jonson (11 Vols.; Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1925), VI, 259. This edition will be the source of all quotations, which will be noted in the body of the paper by act, scene and line.
It is to be suspected, however, that Jonson’s comic apparatus was conceived for a more subtle statement than this. I submit that he offers a second reading of the title, a reversal, as it were, of the order—an “Asse” is the “Devil.” He appears to be saying that folly itself, at its extreme, when accompanied by greed, is evil of a large order. In fact, when compared with the enormities of Fitz-dottrell, the professional efforts of Satan and Pug become almost innocuous. And this folly is manifested over and over in the play by the acceptance of the cloak for the man, of the dressing for the woman, of appearance for reality.

Jonson’s comic process also is somewhat unique in The Devil is an Asse. In his typical play he has a large assemblage of characters suffering from humour, or illusion, or folly, or possibly vice. And in such a play there is usually one character whose vision is clear, and who carries the burden of revealing or curing or punishing the weaknesses of other characters. Such useful instruments are Doctor Clement of Every Man in His Humour, Horace of Poetaster, Dauphine of Epicoene, Arruntius of Sejanus, Penniboy-Canter of The Staple of News. Such a man has primarily a choral function.

This comic process is reversed in The Devil in an Asse. The focus of almost all attention, all enterprise, is Fitz-dottrell; there is no single voice of reason and right opinion, though Manly and Wittipol approach having such voices. But to almost every character is given, at some stage of the play, a word of scorn for the monstrous follies of Fitz-dottrell—an opportunity to participate in the choric comment.3

The foregoing observations are preliminary to a glance at some of the processes, metaphorical, logical, comic, by which Jonson establishes the rash statement of his title. The heart of his method is the proliferation of a single image, that of the “cloak.” The archetypal cloak is of course that which Fitz-dottrell receives

3That Fitz-dottrell represents the essential evil of The Devil Is An Asse is noted by Freida R. Townsend in Apologia for Bartholomew Fair (New York: The Modern Language Association, 1947): “Fitz-dottrell is the inviting center” p. 80. Herford and Simpson (op. cit.) do not consider this problem. Folly is not listed as one of the objects of Jonson’s comic satire in her The Satric and the Didactic in Ben Jonson’s Comedy (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1947) by Helena Watts Baum. J. J. Enck in his Jonson and the Comic Truth (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1957) finds the play to be disappointing, principally because of weakness in the sentimental plot. More recently, C. G. Thayer in Ben Jonson (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963) finds Fitz-dottrell, in his fit of madness, to be an embodiment of the devil (p. 171).
from Wittipol as payment for a fifteen minute conversation with
Mistress Fitz-dottrell—the cloak which he himself most aptly calls
"the price of folly." The imagery of clothing is first advanced in
the opening scene, in which the Great Devil and Pug and Old
Iniquity are discussing Pug’s qualifications as an emissary to
Earth from the Commonwealth of Hell. The nature of the
Earthly vices, which are far beyond the competence of Pug, is
established in terms of dress:

They haue their Vices, there, most like to Vertues;
You cannot know 'hem, apart, by any difference:
They weare the same clothes, eate (o’) the same meate,
Sleepe i’ the selfe-same beds, ride i’ those coaches,
Or very like, foure horses in a coach,
As the best men and women. Tissue gownes,
Garters and roses, fourescore pound a paire,
Embroydred stockings, cut-work smocks, and shirts,
More certaine marks of lechery, now, and pride,
Then ere they were of true nobility!

(I,i,121-130)

The workings of this cloak image, and the numerous assump-
tions of the “asse” by Fitz-dottrell, are the key to the ironic effects
of the play.

The word “asse” occurs many times—as an epithet—in the course
of the play. It is almost always applied to Fitz-dottrell: by Wittipol,
(speaking for Mistress Fitz-dottrell),

But such a moon-ling, as no wit of man
Or roses can redeeme from being an Asse;

(I,vi,158,159)

by Pug, speaking to Mistress Fitz-dottrell,

Why, wee will make a Cokes of this Wise Master,
We will, my Mistresse, an absolute fine Cokes,
And mock, to ayre, all the deepe diligences
Of such a solemnne, and effectuall Asse;

(II,ii,104-107)

by Wittipol,

WIT. Goe, you are an Asse. FIT. I am resolu’d on’t, Sir.
WIT. I thinke you are . . . . Away you brokers blocke;

(II,vii,13-15)
twice by Fitz-dottrell himself,
   I am not altogether, an Asse, good Gentlemen
   (III,iii,116)
and,
   A Cuckold, and an Asse, and my wiues Ward;
   (IV,vii,78)
and by Manly, as final assessment in the play,
   But you'll still be an Asse, in spight of prouidence.
   (V,viii,154)
Even though the title of “Asse” is awarded to no other person in
the play, except of course to Satan himself, Sir Poule Either-side
and the ladies Either-side and Taile-bush display the quality in
abundance. And one suspects on the basis of the Prologue, that
the same quality is to be found abundantly in the audience itself.

   After giving his title, Jonson taxes the audience for “allowing
us no place.” “This tract,” he says, “will ne'er admit our vice,
because of yours.” And perhaps as an admonitory word to them
against taking appearance for reality, he closes thus: “And when
sixe times you ha' seen't, If this Play doe not like, the Diuell is
in't.” Though Pug's mission is ostensibly “to” Earth, the conference
in the first scene between Satan, Pug, and Iniquity is held “Heere
about London,” where “it is fear'd they haue a stud o' their owne/
Will put downe ours.”
   (I,i,108-109)

   The reality, of the Devil, then, to Jonson, is folly, “Asse”-hood,
and the primary manifestation of the nature of folly lies in Fitz-
dottrell. The demonstration of his folly is through the cloak, real
or metaphorical, i.e., the taking of appearance for reality. This is
one of Jonson's continuing themes, stated most concisely, perhaps,
in Volpone:

   Hood an asse, with reuerend purple,
   So you can hide his two ambitious eares,
   And, he shall passe for a cathedrall Doctor.
   (I,ii,111-114)

   Much of Bartholomew Fair is devoted also to the theme of pur-
poseless folly, and there are numerous connecting links between
that play and The Devil is an Asse. The folly of John Littlewit,
the “foole-John,” is never relieved. Like Fitz-dottrell, he is much taken with his wife’s dressing; in fact, he admires her prodigiously in the “Spanish dress,” with the “fine high shooes,” the “Cioppinos” of Wittipol as the Spanish Lady in *The Devil is an Asse*. But Bartholomew Cokes is many times an “asse,” as attested by Waspe, by Win-wife, by Quarlous. He is a “serious,” a “resolute,” a “phantastical” fool. The sport of gulling him is, according to Edgeworth, “call’d Dorrington the Dottrell.” Both Cokes and Fitz-dottrell lack souls. In *Bartholomew Fair* the point is made by Edgeworth, speaking of Cokes:

> Talke of him to haue soule? 'heart, if hee haue any more then a thing gien him in stead of salt, onely to keepe him from stinking, I'le be hang'd afore my time.

(IV,ii,54-56)

And of Fitz-dottrell, Wittipol says,

> you are the wife,
> To so much blasted flesh, as scarce hath soule,
> In stead of salt, to keepe it sweete.

(I,vi,88-90)

The sustained image through which the folly of Cokes is manifested is, as in *The Devil is an Asse*, that of clothing, not assumed, but lost:

> I ha’ lost my selfe, and my cloake and my hat; and my fine sword, and my sister, and *Numps*, and Mistris *Grace*,
> (a Gentlewoman that I should ha’ married) and a cut-worke handkercher, shee ga’ mee, and two purses to day.
> And my bargaine o’ Hobby-horses and Ginger-bread, which grieues me worst of all.

(IV,ii,81-86)

The last speech in *Bartholomew Fair* is also given to Cokes—“and bring the Actors along, wee'll ha’ the rest o' the Play at home.”

One wonders whether Jonson did not indeed “bring the Actors along,” and “ha’ the rest of the Play” with Fitz-dottrell and company. Fitz-(son of) Dottrell, at the extremity of his folly, is a “Cokes”; the given name of Fitz-dottrell, Fabian, may be a by-product of the puppet show in *Bartholomew Fair*. But it is only in *The Devil is an Asse* that this particular manifestation of human

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4Cf. footnote 5.
The Devil is an Asse

weakness becomes the object of such concentrated indignation on Jonson’s part.

The movement of the play is three-fold, with Fitz-dottrell as the object, or victim, of all the lines of action. There is the enterprise of the Kingdom of Hell, in which Pug is to serve Fitz-dottrell, in order to prove his value to his master; there is the enterprise of the tribe of brokers, led by Meercraft, to cozen Fitz-dottrell of his property; and there is the assault of Wittipol on the virtue of Fitz-dottrell’s beauteous wife. In each line of action, or at the point of contact of two, the fresh follies, the fresh “cloaks” build up until the final one, the assumption by Fitz-dottrell of possession by the Devil himself. The irony of this passage is magnificent, since it is the only one of the cloaks which Fitz-dottrell is really conscious of wearing.

The first of Fitz-dottrell’s follies in the realm of clothing occurs during his initial encounter with Pug. Pug is a Devil, clothed in the body of a cutpurse, the garments of gentleman-usher, and the shoes of a prostitute. Yet the wise Fitz-dottrell, refusing, because he can find no cloven feet, to believe that he is a Devil, hires him because his name is Devil. Pug himself is deceived by his own appearance, thinking he can use his borrowed body for “venery,” thinking that because he is clothed in the body of a man he, a Devil, can hold his own among the vices of man.

As soon as the enterprise of Satan and Pug has imposed the false servant on Fitz-dottrell, his confidence in his own wisdom and fortune is such that Wittipol and Manly can easily persuade him to don, in return for fifteen minutes of his wife’s conversation, a magnificent cloak—one acquired from Inigne, who is of what Satan calls “our tribe of brokers.” His pride in the cloak, and in his own wisdom is almost unbounded; he accepts with complacency his wife’s suggestion that he may be laughed at, unconsciously predicting his course throughout the play: “Let ’em laugh, wife, Let me haue such another cloake to morrow” (1,vi,40-41).

Having donned the cloaks provided by Satan and Wittipol, Fitz-dottrell is ripe for the more elaborate enterprise of the mas-

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5In Barholomew Fair a self-conscious mistake is made by Puppet Pythias, with reference to the Dummow bacon, in calling it Westfabiyan in error for Westphalian. The word Fabian, according to NED, occurs in the literature of the period only in the Lenten Stuffe of Thomas Nashe. I intend in a later essay to show connections between Lenten Stuffe and the Puppet Show of Barholomew Fair.

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ter-broker, Meercraft, and his lesser colleagues, Ingine, Traines, and Everill. They lead him into an elaborate sequence of follies, of acceptsances of appearance, which will explain and establish the proposition of the title.

The first of this sequence is the assumption of nobility, as the “Duke of Drown’d-Land.” The amazing Meercraft, proposing his project of the draining of the marshes, suggests the figure of eighteen million pounds as the possible revenue. Fitz-dottrell’s cupidity, which has already led him to conjurers, has led him to take a devil for a servant, and has led him very near the prostitution of his wife, is enough to make him embrace the project, even if the added incentive of the title of Duke were absent. But, the title having been suggested, Fitz-dottrell becomes the Duke, and must comport himself accordingly. A minor manifestation of his asse-hood, of his wearing of the spurious cloaks, is the “Lord’s face” which he must assume upon arising, a face which must not recognize even his nearest acquaintance.

While the “Lord’s face” has been in preparation, the cloak motif has been at work in another segment of the play. Lady Fitz-dottrell in her clothing is “Very brave,” is, according to Pug, in “all this Rigging and fine Tackle,” a “neat handsome vessels,” “of good sayle” (II,111,111,112). The care is not hers, but her husband’s—

he is sensuall that way.
In every dressing, he do’s study her.

(I,iv,17,18)

Pug is naturally led to the conclusion that “No woman drest with so much care, and study./Doth dresse her self in vaine” (II,v,22,23). Therefore, seeking to advance the cause of Hell, with a little dividend in the way of “venery” for himself, he petitions her that he may be “Stil’d o’ your pleasures.” This mistaking of appearance for reality secures no advancement of the cause of Hell, nor any pleasures for Pug, but only a beating from his master.

Fitz-dottrell has all confidence that he can “doe well enough” as a Duke, but his wife is “such an untoward thing” that she must be remodeled—“Is there an Academy for women?” There is indeed an academy, produced full-blown from the mind of Meercraft upon Ingine’s whisper about the “Spanish gowne.” Fitz-dottrell, who has taken a “sensuall” pleasure in the fine dressing of his wife, takes an even greater one in this dressing for his “Dutchesse.” The
trappings are elaborate: Wittipol, rather than Dicke Robinson, the player, for the Spanish woman; the broker’s Spanish gown; the ring, which must be sealed for, as a present to assure admittance to the academy; Jonson’s own alchemical jargon for the Spanish Lady’s advice about Spanish focuses and manners; the home of Lady Taile-bush, the lady projectress, as the seat of the academy. Like the first cloak, which he bought from Wittipol with fifteen minutes of his wife’s conversation, and its metaphorical successors, this cloak, this appearance, becomes reality for Fitz-dottrell.

The reality is indeed so great that when Everill demands Meatcraft’s time, and to account for the demand, the “Master of the Dependances” springs from the fertile brain of that broker, Fitz-dottrell is eager to assume an additional cloak, that of the first client of the “office” of “Dependances,” in order that he may pursue his quarrel with Wittipol in a manner becoming a duke, even to the making of a conveyance of his lands to a “Feoffee.”

His enchantment with the Spanish lady—Wittipol in Meatcraft and Ingine’s gown—is so great that he sends his wife into another room with the Spanish lady, who is to “melt, cast and forme her as you shalle thinke good” (IV.iv.254). The result of this meeting is actually the enlistment of Wittipol and Manly as friends and protectors of Mistress Fitz-dottrell. But the meeting will in due time provide a fresh “cloak” for Fitz-dottrell, that of cuckold, a misapprehension that will remain with him even at the end of the play.

But the work of the “cloak” of the dependancy is not over. A “Feoffee” must be found, and though Meatcraft and Everill are assiduous candidates, Fitz-dottrell’s infatuation will let him consider only the Spanish lady, and at “her” earnest request, a substitute in the person of Manly. The revelation that the Spanish lady is Wittipol gives us a fresh title for Fitz-dottrell, “Duke of Shore-ditch,” and some new “cloaks,” “a Cuckold, and an Asse and my wiues ward.”

Though he has conceded it, the asse-hood of Fitz-dottrell is not yet fully developed, for a final “cloak” must be donned, one which brings the movement back to its starting point. At the suggestion of Meatcraft he must pretend that he is possessed of a devil, as the result of witchcraft on the part of his wife and Wittipol and Manly, in order that the enfeoffment of Manly may be set aside. The trappings are provided by Meatcraft and Everill, the bellows, the false belly, the mouse, while the offer of the true
Devil, Pug, to give professional help is spurned. Sir Poule Either-side is brought to witness the possession, and he has qualities which make him a most willing and competent witness. In fact, he interprets all the manifestations and utterances of Fitz-dottrell in the light of Puritan language and beliefs. Urged by Meercraft, the unfortunate victim of possession speaks "languages," which are to Sir Poule a manifest proof of the presence of a Devil. The principal such speech is a passage of Greek, which in translation is this:

Ah! Thrice, four, five, twelve times, or rather ten thousand times unhappy fate.\(^6\)

The passage is from the *Platus* of Aristophanes, and it is spoken by the Informer, who is shortly to lose his "witness," as Fitz-dottrell loses Sir Poule. The Informer must also give up his very handsome coat for the ragged, dirty coat of the "Just Man."

This final manifestation of the cloak motif, possession by a devil, is comparable in manner and function to the notable scenes which give the resolutions in earlier plays, such as the courts of Justice Clement, of Cynthia, of Augustus, of the Avocatori of Venice, and the Puppet show of *Bartholomew Fair*. In those, authority, legal, or moral, or comic, resolves all lines of action in terms of the cure of illusion or folly, or punishment where cure is not possible.

The manifestations of evil—of Devil-hood—in *The Devil is an Asse* have been on three levels: The professional, in Pug; those of Earth, in the broker group; and the extreme, the incurable, in Fitz-dottrell. Pug, presumably because of his utter ineffectiveness, receives what is for him a reward, the escape from Earth to the comparative paradise of Hell. The entire broker group, the brilliant Meercraft, the unspeakable Everill, Ingine and Traines, the cozenner Guilthead, the ladies of fashion, compared with whom "there is no Hell" (V,ii,14)—all those who "had worse counsels in’t"—even to the Puritan justice, Sir Poule Either-side, are by Manly, who at the end of the play is Jonson’s comic spokesman, permitted to go virtually unpunished. They are merely exorted to “repent

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\(^6\)Oates and O'Neill, eds. *The Complete Greek Drama* (2 Vols.; New York: Random House, 1938), II, 1097. The Greek which Fitz-dottrell speaks is this:

Οἰμοι κακόδαιμον, / Καὶ τρισκακοδαιμόν, καὶ τετράκις, 
καὶ πεντάκις, / Καὶ δωδεκάκις, καὶ μυριάκις.
THE DEVIL IS AN ASSE

'hem, and be not detected" (V,viii,168). Vices they have, in varying degrees, but not the ultimate vice, folly unredeemed, folly put at the service of greed.

But for Fitz-dottrell there is no redemption. When he learned of the departure of Pug from the body of the cutpurse, he abandoned almost all the cloaks—"my land is drown'd indeed" (V,viii,159). He keeps, however, one cloak, the false belief that he is a cuckold. His essential quality, that which is no cloak and which is in essence the Devil, he also keeps: in the words of Manly, "you'll still be an Asse" (V,viii,154).