Would-Be-Politics: Early Modern Travel Writing and the Drama of Political Expertise

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In what may be the most quoted aphorism on early modern diplomacy, the English ambassador Henry Wotton famously wrote to a friend that "[a]n ambassador is an honest gentleman sent to lie abroad for the good of his country."[1] While most critical uses of this aphorism emphasize the double, or possible triple entendre present in Wotton's use of "lie," it is worth considering that Wotton defines the work of ambassadorial labor as a mode of political travel. While Wotton's comment does highlight the degree to which the job of the agent of state is to deceive their host for the betterment of the nation, it is also key to public and social understandings of clandestine government service that this was labor performed away from the British homeland. This essay examines discourses of foreign travel with an eye turned towards the degree to which it was imagined as aspirational labor which could generate social and political capital for travelers. Looking at the drama of Ben Jonson and his representations of the aspirational traveler, this essay argues that *Volpone* critiques social discourses which sought to valorize travelers as educated servants of state who could serve as educators to English audiences.

Early modern political commentators viewed travel into foreign countries as part of the larger regimen of an aristocratic education. While some commentators such as Roger Ascham in the 1570 *The*

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Schoolmaster or Thomas Nashe in the 1594 *The Unfortunate Traveler* viewed travel with a measure of skepticism, among both critics and proponents of foreign travel there was a persistent belief that, assuming a well-honed mind, the observation of foreign customs and practices could make one a better servant within the English diplomatic corps.[2] This belief then promoted the proliferation of travel, as the English government began encouraging aristocratic travel to build a more educated diplomatic corps.[3] Mark Netzloff's recent study on the intelligence work performed by the early modern traveler reminds us that "[f]ar from inhabiting distinct social spheres, the diplomat and traveler are brought together through the circulation of news and intelligence."[4] Scholarship such as this seeks to demonstrate the degree to which the state sought to mold travelers into useful agents of intelligence and the ways in which travelers communicated these lessons back to the English public.

Central to this essay's exploration of the early modern traveling intelligencer is Lisa Jardine and William Sherman's theorization of "knowledge transactions," the form of social exchange by which early modern political actors emphasized their status as scholars to alter the social framing of their service to wealthy patrons. They write, "[t]his kind of activity…we call a 'knowledge transaction'; the working relationship established between noble employer and his professional reader is what we call in our title, 'scholarly service.'"[5] Exploring the work of the traveler as a kind of scholarly service, wherein the traveler demonstrates their fitness for employment through their ability to serve as a political useful traveler, this essay builds upon critical conversations addressing the manner in which drama of the period represents and critiques these forms of knowledge transactions. Practical guidebooks, loosely termed *ars apodemica*, taught travelers how to best position themselves as economic participants in systems of knowledge transactions and in turn, travelers played up their own status as scholarly servants as a means of accumulating cultural capital. Histories of travel writing have tended to emphasize their place within economic marketplaces, focusing on the growing demand for increasingly elaborate and detailed travel narratives to the farthest reaches of the globe, particularly as travel came to stand in for English desires to participate in what Carl Thompson isolates

as the economic "opportunities [travel] opened up for trade, conquest and colonization."[6] Early modern English audiences had a voracious appetite for the consumption of travel writing and as a result, the travelling class could parley their travels into economic advancement through both private demonstrations of skill and public accounts of their travels.

As proponents of travel understood that it could serve an educative function, travelers were encouraged, as Andrew Hadfield notes, to "learn how to observe the correct details, and take useful notes on the experience,"[7] reflecting an emerging empiricist strain of archival production amongst early modern travelers. As Noah Millstone argues, early modern political culture emphasized the training of the individual to properly read both the history of politics and the contemporary state of Europe, and a key aspect of this training was the consumption of writing which framed itself as politically educative.[8] To aid in this process, the foreign traveler, operating independently of the state, was tasked with filling in the gaps in the early modern English diplomatic archive. Travelers, in turn, sought to leverage this archival production, using their observational skills to note their preparedness to serve in stable positions with the English government. Coupled with an emerging public market for tales of travel to far off lands, this led to a mass proliferation of both salacious narratives of travels into foreign spaces, and texts theorizing the proper way in which travelers should engage with their journeys abroad which served to legitimate the value of these travels as knowledge transactions. These texts posed a threat as they were often produced by travelers who had little claim to expertise beyond wealth and the scant reading of guidebooks to travel. Travelers like Ben Jonson's Sir Would-be Politic, a downwardly mobile English gentleman, are represented as foolish reflections of the idealized politically astute reader who treats their travels as a demonstration of their political competency. The play critiques the intellectual valorization of this mode of intelligence work, reminding audiences through the farce of Would-be's humiliation that his travels have not advanced his political position nor educated him as a competent reader of politics.

The stage participated in this outgrowth of foreign travel writing through the repeated attempts by playwrights to recreate

foreign sites within the space of the theater, as Shakespeare and his contemporaries frequently sought to reconstruct foreign spaces on the stage. Shakespeare displays an ambivalence towards foreign travel, presenting Laertes's travels to France as educative and framing Othello's education resulting from his travels abroad as a significant component of his value to the state of Venice, but also showing that travel fails to fully provide the social stability Othello craves. While playwrights often viewed the recreation of foreign spaces on the stage as offering the potential for a political education, aligning themselves with the Aschams of the era who viewed reading about the foreign as preferable to actual travel, the proliferation of plays depicting salacious narratives of Italy only served to enhance the public's fascination with the idea of foreign travel. Stephen Wittek suggests that this theatrical investment in the movement of and salability of current events constructs the material conditions required for figures like Would-be to profit from their acquisition of foreign intelligence. He argues that "[b]y enabling people to think through current events in an interconnected, analytical, familiar, and emotional manner, theatrical discourse assisted at the birth of one of the most important concepts in the history of literature: the idea of news."[9] This interconnected process of interpretation and analysis is key to both the economic value of news production and the public function of foreign intelligence gathering as it is understood as a project of state service, and it is a part of Would-be's project as he maneuvers through Venice. Daniel Carey reminds us that travelers were often addressing such a public readership and thus, "[t]he traveller acted as mediator, describing the strange and unknown while avoiding deceitfulness, on behalf of readers seeking the double benefit of truth and entertainment."[10] Readers and viewers of staged travel thus may have been less on their guard and less adept at discerning truth from fiction than readers of more clearly fictional narratives. Jonson's Volpone is, then, suggestive of a deeper anxiety with the problem of the boorish court sycophant. By placing him in the center of this cycle of inaccurate knowledge transactions, the play suggests an anxiety surrounding the very idea that a political education within the theatre can truly be free of the threat of Would-be Politics and their terrible political reads.

These forms of knowledge transactions, in which early modern travelers attempt to parlay their travels into lucrative positions of

political importance, in turn become key to public understandings of the kinds of political education circulating in English society.[11] Ideas surrounding political education reach early modern public audiences through both the public dissemination of political theory and the dramatic use of this theory in the theater. Here, I draw on András Kiséry's understanding of political competency, his term for "a familiarity with—and a facility in discussing—the business of politics that is put on display in sociable exchange as a marker of distinction," for the backbone of this essay's exploration of representations of travel and foreign intelligence as kinds of cultural capital that an individual is trained not merely to possess but to perform.[12] Early modern audiences came to understand the theater as a site of political education, one grounded in the developing logics of statecraft as an analogue for stagecraft and this article looks towards both the origins of these discourses of competency in humanist travel writing and their appearance in the plays of the period.[13]

Given that the English government was only beginning to develop a large-scale archive of political intelligence under the purview of spymaster Francis Walsingham in the late 1500s, England lacked the intelligence infrastructure present in other comparable diplomatic powers, such as Venice.[14] As a result, much of the work of early modern English diplomats in terms of knowledge production derived out of the tradition of the Venetian relazioni, detailed writings on the specific nature of foreign states recorded by travelers and ambassadors.[15] Attempting to replicate this project in an English context, travel was transformed into a model of government service for politically aspirational travelers. This was particularly noticeable when this work was performed by the educated elite and politically mobile class, as it could be leveraged to fill in the gaps left by a subserviced diplomatic corps. To understand and prepare for travel is to prepare to serve as a member of the foreign diplomatic corps, even if indirectly.

The English government worried that ill-equipped travelers would fail to remain steeled against the temptations of foreign travel, and therefore required license and state permission.[16] The traveler was encouraged to learn the customs and behaviors of the foreign state to best serve as an asset for the state intelligence apparatus. However, such learning is nigh impossible to draw

out, as Would-be does, from the playbooks and aphorisms of the stage (5.4.41-42),[17] as the myth of Venice far outstrips the reality of Venice.[18] *Volpone* isolates this concern within Would-be's embrace of the popular image of Venice, drawn from plays and the handful of stock political thinkers that an early modern theater going audience would regularly associate with Italian governance. This is a failed political education, one drawn out of a desire to perform knowledge of Venice. Would-be may imagine himself as an idealized English traveler, but the play foregrounds the degree to which his attentiveness to popular discourses, drama and narratives fails to produce a useful or politically productive character of the state of Venice.

While Would-be's political education is drawn from the language of early modern *ars apodemica*, its material content finds itself drawn almost exclusively from the logics of the stage. By placing his secretive notes within the space of the playbooks, he is replicating the vision of Venice that is common to the early modern stage.[19] Peregrine, in dressing down Would-be, off-handedly suggests to the audience that Would-be "would be a precious thing / to fit our English stage" (2.1.57-58). Would-be's Venice is a dangerous space controlled by powerful merchant interests and the spies that they employ to protect their assets and on this stage, he is not wrong, as the play affirms the cold, bureaucratic heart of Venice.[20]

To counteract false visions of the foreign state, *ars apodemica* sought to construct the ideal traveling subject who could push through public rumor and enter foreign spaces as a studied traveler. Emphasis has been placed on the travel guidebooks of figures such as Thomas Palmer and Francis Bacon, whose well-received books of advice for travelers transformed the *ars apodemica* into a component part of a political education.[21] One such text, John Florio's advice to travelers, in his 1591 treatise, *Second Fruits to be Gathered of Twelve Trees* underscores the degree to which observation, dissimulation and careful attunement to productive sight were privileged skill sets among early modern travelers. John Florio was an Italian tutor and an English spy, as well as an influential translator who worked closely with Italian agents on the continent, and his writing reflects an understanding of travel that privileges the skillsets needed to act as a productive agent of

state.[22] He writes, "[a]nd if you will be a traveller, and wander safely through the world: wheresoever you come, have alwayes the eies of Faulcon, that ye may see farre, the eares of an Asses, that ye may heere wel, the face of an Ape, that ye may be readie to laugh, the mouth of a Hog, to eat all things, the shoulder of a Camell, that you may beare any thing with patience, the legges of a Stagge, to flie from dangers."[23] To travel well, one must be able to exceed the baseness of human senses and the invocation of these animalistic qualities serves to valorize the traveler who shapes their body and temperament in the service of their travels. Whereas the writings on spies and other informants which liken them to dogs and birds tended to dehumanize the political agent, reducing them to mere instruments of their master's will, Florio's vision of the animalistic traveler highlights the training and skillful self-fashioning necessary to draw out the productive skills of the animals his writing invokes.[24] It is performance of one's malleability which marks out the desirable traveler. While this advice is positioned as a project of personal safety, the attentiveness to the observational awareness of one's surroundings indicates the degree to which early modern travel literature collapses travel, hermeneutic skills, and intelligence collection.[25]

This sense of the traveler as mimic of the natural world aligns with the play's investment in the dramatic form of the animal fable. Jonas A. Barish's famous attempt to align the play's two comic subplots hinges on the placement of Sir Politic and Lady Politic into the logic of the play's moralizing beast fable, casting them as Poll Parrots, "recalling that parrots not only habitually chatter, they mimic."[26] Would-be and Lady Would-be are consummate mimics, envisioning themselves as adept dissimulators capable of entering into the space of Venice and using their knowledge of the city to blend in with the locality. This Jonson views as a mode of folly that the play seeks to punish, but it is worth considering the degree to which the project of mimicry is itself at the heart of the project of the astute and judicious traveler. Both Would-bes come to understand simulation and feigning, here more active and intentional models of social mimicry, to offer opportunities for the generation of both economic and social capital. Just as Volpone schemes as a fox, or Corvino preys as vulture for status and material gain, the Would-bes mimic as parrots for prospective economic advancement. This

is what draws Lady Would-be to Venice (2.1.11-13); she earnestly comes to believe that by cultivating the impression of her own Venetian-ness she can advance her political and social aspirations.

Picking up on these social discourses, drawn out of popular travel writing, Would-be imagines himself as the idealized vision of the educated, traveling intelligencer and in doing so, the character works to undermine the logics of political and social advancement that underscore the *ars apodemica*. Would-be is a downwardly mobile member of the English gentry, a "poor knight," (2.1.26) who believes his time in Venice may aid his ailing fortune. Would-be imagines his own travels acting as a kind of knowledge transaction, and in doing so, he frames his travels as a site of personal and political promotion contingent on the specific subset of skills which he imagines to be vital to his travels, skills that he has cultivated through an attentive practice of reading and a careful training of his observational and interpretive skills (4.1.1-9). At the same time, he envisions ways in which the cultural capital made visible in his travels can be parlayed into personal economic gain, thus laying bare the degree to which knowledge transactions are not meaningfully distinct from other modes of paid service, evidenced in his comically long list of possible money-making schemes (4.1.49-53, 60-65, 68-75, 85-99, 100-108, 112-125). Within the play, Would-be is not merely a sycophantic fool, but he is a sycophantic fool whose engagement with the discourse of the ennobled English traveler has made him overconfident in his skills and their relevance to his own state service, because he believes that this performance of competency is key to reversing his ailing economic fortunes. Highlighting the incompetence of the traveler, the play envisions a world in which the false promises of the aristocratic traveler are laid bare to the English audience. Rather than affording audiences a discursive space to join in the conversations of the *ars apodemica*, the play makes visible the follies and failings of these social promises, while simultaneously calling into question its own relationship to the discourse of travel and knowledge production.

As an ambitious traveler, Would-be positions himself as a politically competent reader of men and politics in the mode prescribed by the *ars apodemica*. To demonstrate this political competency to his fellow traveler Peregrine, he speaks of his time

interfacing with an agent of the English government abroad, saying:

> He has received weekly intelligence,
> Upon my knowledge, out of the Low Countries,
> For all parts of the world, in cabbages;
> And those dispended again to ambassadors,
> In oranges, musk-melons, apricocks,
> Lemons pome-citrons, and such-like; sometimes
> In Colchester oysters, and your Selsey Cockles. (2.1.68-74)

Here, Would-be's triumphant declaration of his own understanding of the intelligence apparatus associates intelligence with food, framed as the luxurious consumption of the state, traded between ambassador and agent as if it were a delicacy. Consumed as an act of ritual exchange between agents of state, Would-be places his intelligencers in a place of public commerce. Here, Would-be envisions the exchange of sensitive information a knowledge transaction wherein the state agent's role is not meaningfully distinct from any other merchant or trader, going into foreign lands so that they may return with valuable goods. That Would-be likens the labor of the intelligencer to the exchange of food for the state underscores that he views this mode of travel in a language of economic exchange, seeing these travels as commodities for trade in the markets of London. Would-be reads all his interactions through a logic of mercantile capitalism, wherein the agent's primary goal is the accumulation of valuable commodities that can be exchanged for economic and social capital.

This practice of poor reading extends into Would-be's sense of his own self-fashioning as a skillful dissimulator, as he imagines himself a discerning political reader that can teach generations of English travelers how to learn from his own example. Advising Peregrine, the play's judicious and thoughtful Englishman, on the proper habits of a traveler, Would-be echoes the language of Florio's advice to travelers, stating that he considers himself to have infiltrated the Venetian polis. He brags, "I now have lived here, 'tis some fourteen months; / Within the first week of my landing here, / All took me for a citizen of Venice / I knew the forms so well" (4.1.36-39). Relying on citations of Contarini's *The Commonwealth and Government of Venice*, he mirrors the habits of other comedic sycophants, citing knowledge drawn from abstract guidebooks to

demonstrate a competency in the ways of government. That he positions this reading in the same context as his purchase of a home in Venice and his dealing with local Jewish merchants suggests that Would-be views reading habits as a strategy for covertly entering foreign spaces, in the vein prescribed by Florio, Palmer and other proponents of English travel (4.1.40-41). This attachment to the informative power of reading, here marked as a comic misappraisal of knowledge, mirrors contemporary debates concerning the relationship between knowledge accrued through books and knowledge accrued through travel, particularly as it pertains to foreign intelligence.[27] As a student of travel literature, Would-be attempts to demonstrate his competency through engagement with political writing, but he is only able to frame his own learning through popular citation making this more of a performance of his own imagined expertise in line with his useless but braggadocious knowledge of the English intelligence apparatus. For instance, Would-be cites Machiavelli, echoing the kinds of demonstration by aphorism that Anthony Esler, in his study of the education of the Elizabethan gentleman, notes as indicative of the failure of the humanist education that compels Englishmen to travel and seek out foreign texts. Demonstrating awareness of this failure, he notes the Earl of Essex bemoaning that "the most of the noblemen and gentlemen of our time have no other use of their learning but in table talk."[28] Would-be's reading of Machiavelli reflects on this fear, becoming a practice of citing expertise not because it is useful, but because the citation establishes him as a reader of Machiavelli.[29] While he has attempted to garner a political education through an attentive practice of reading and commenting upon the requisite skills of the traveler, his emphasis on demonstrating that he has read these texts has left him with little more than a collection of citations used to show that he has either read them or overheard them in use.

Beyond this misreading, the mere fact that Would-be cites Machiavelli denotes the degree to which his reading is understood to be insufficient and cursory, positioning him closer to the performance of knowledge described by Kiséry than that described by Millstone. In a span of fifteen lines, Would-be cites a Florentine philosopher from the early 15th century, a French theorist from the middle of the 16th century and a recently translated history by

Contarini, a Venetian Cardinal (4.1.25-40). The collection of works that Would-be cites to display an understanding of contemporary Venetian customs are neither particularly contemporary nor particularly Venetian. Would-be invokes Machiavelli not as a specific theorist but instead as an understandable cultural reference point for a political theorist. As with his citation of Bodin, which is little more than name dropping a second theorist, his invocation of the works of Machiavelli are meant to signal that he has knowledge of recognizable political thinkers whose writing grants weight to his otherwise airy claims.

Thinking of these demonstrations of citation as learned bits of political advice, given freely to a fellow traveler, Would-be is positioning himself as an educator and a learned compatriot to his fellow Englishmen, which marks him out as far more threatening than endearing to the much more keen-eyed Peregrine. Would-be enacts a performance of political competency without a trained eye turned towards the complexity of travel. He is an overly excited lecturer delivering empty advice to a student who clearly sees through the façade. The tension here lies in the demands placed upon the public to adequately distinguish the Politic Would-bes from the Florios of the world. Theatrical performances of political competency rely heavily upon both the playwright's and the audience's ability to distinguish useful and performative political advice and it is not frequently the case that the bad political teacher is transparent as Would-be, particularly when aided by the legitimacy of print writing in the vein Wittek describes. The humor of Would-be hinges upon the presence of an audience surrogate figure, played deftly by Peregrine, who is savvy at seeing through the performative bluster of the Would-be Politics of the world.

Netzloff's history of the development of travel as a source of information suggests that early modern travelers were instructed to keep detailed records of their own travel as a means of demonstrating their value to the state. He writes "[t]hese journals served not only to display travelers' literary and rhetorical skills but also to testify to the knowledge they had acquired through travel."[30] Would-be's notes reflect this logic, as he seeks to use them to educate Peregrine under the promise that he "not reveal," them to others. (4.1.83) However, as Peregrine reads the notes, he finds an unfocused, diary-like account of an aimless day's travel, full of

information that would be of no use to a reader. In Would-be's notes, he consciously recalls a conversation with a Dutch merchant on the "Ragion Del Stato," suggesting that even within his notes to himself, he upholds the weight given to citation as a means of demonstrating competency and a note that "at St Mark I urined," (4.1.141,144) playfully demonstrates the degree to which Would-be is incapable of understanding the weight of his travels, viewing his visit to Saint Mark's Cathedral as focused on the voiding of his bladder. Feeling that the takeaway from his meeting with the Dutch Merchant was the fact that he burst a toothpick reinforces Would-be's failure to internalize advice to travelers, as he makes careful and diligent efforts to record his actions and observations in Venice, but he is aimless and unfocused, accounting for everything he has done in Venice, regardless of how mundane or misguided.

This sense that Would-be seeks to stand in as an educator motivates Peregrine's desire to humiliate and correct Would-be's misguided aspirations. It is not only that Would-be is incompetent, but that Would-be is, in fact, accurately understanding the performance of competence and therefore must be disciplined lest undiscerning audiences confuse performing knowledge for imparting knowledge. Carey makes clear that "[h]owever assiduously travel writers deployed rhetorical techniques to confirm their integrity, the decision of whether to invest belief in their accounts rested with readers,"[31] and the play suggests that Peregrine, and by extension Jonson, worry about the readers' ability to distinguish fact from farce. Peregrine's scheme recognizes the general danger that Would-be poses to the English body politic if he is not dissuaded from his aspirations as a traveler. Speaking of a plan to cast Would-be out of Venice and into one of several remote Mediterranean cities, Peregrine worries that Would-be would "have his / adventures put I' the Book of Voyages / and his gulled story registered for truth" (5.4.4-6). This line notes the degree to which the authorizing power of the form of the travel narrative grants a degree of legitimacy to the fictions woven by authors wishing to overstate or fabricate their claims, particularly for the advancement of their personal authority. Further, it suggests an anxiety in Peregrine concerning the state of the public archive of knowledge were Would-be's story "registered for truth."[32] Peregrine here expresses a distaste for the possibility that Would-

be may be granted a measure of increased legitimation were his story to enter the literary marketplace and therefore be understood as truth in the same way that Volpone's Mountebank is granted legitimation via his invocation of medical authority, at least in the minds of someone as undiscerning as Would-be (2.2.8-13). That this writing might be treated as useful or valuable political intelligence marks the degree to which travel writing, when treated as a product of state service, becomes dangerous if not sufficiently policed. Were his words to be taken for truth, as Peregrine fears, it is not merely that English audiences might buy into Would-be's exaggerated stories of the secret maneuvers surrounding Venetian diplomacy, but they would accept the underlying assumption that Would-be's travels grant him, and those like him, an authoritative voice on the inner works of the state.

Peregrine attempts to address this problem through the public humiliation of Would-be, eliminating Would-be's claims to authenticity by pre-emptively entering his story into the public record as a kind of gossip, as Would-be observes in his commentary that this "shall be the fable of all feasts, / The freight of the *gazetti*, ship-boys' tales; / And, which is worst, even talk of public ordinaries" (5.4.82-84). That Peregrine's only recourse to the threat of Would-be's travels entering public consciousness is to disarm the threat by rewriting his place within the public sphere, via the power of rumor and the public press, suggests that the inertia of the public knowledge economy prevents figures like Peregrine from challenging their centrality to public discourse. The play dramatizes Would-be's final reduction into an animal as he takes to hiding from Peregrine and the merchants within a tortoise shell, comically literalizing his attempts to simulate the animalistic qualities of Florio's astute traveler.[33] The performance of this scene hinges upon the physicality and assertiveness of the merchants' efforts to tread upon and kick at the tortoise. This is a deeply physicalized act of violence visited upon the body of Politic-Would-be, imagined as a resolution to the threat posed by Would-be's intervention in Venetian politics and his continued threat to English political spheres.

Kiséry locates the necessity of disciplining Would-be in his belief that he is a worthy political competent, a person deserving of reward and advancement for his knowledge and skills. This is

then understood as a moment in which theatrical audiences can applaud themselves for occupying the place of Peregrine on the stage, carefully discerning the expert from the fool, and joining in the mockery of Would-be. Reading the moment as the stage self-reflexively examining its own place in the creation of political knowledge, Kiséry sees Jonson celebrating the potential of the stage to produce a lay knowledge of politics precisely through its ability to make visible the inefficacies of the performance of political knowledge, arguing "[t]he authority of the wit and the dramatist regulates the social uses of knowledge—the human, ethical, cultural underpinnings of how knowledge is deployed in society—rather than presuming to regulate knowledge itself."[34] I wish to expand upon this and make visible the ways in which Jonson contrasts the stage with other means of displaying authority. That Would-be would be a good fit on the stage does not unnerve Peregrine, because on the stage, his manifest failures as a political thinker are visible to their audience. Peregrine's fear is that he has metaphorically left the stage to enter the space of the foreign and therefore is in danger of accidently siphoning off some of the professional legitimation that Kiséry suggests is part of the social advancement promised by the sufficient demonstration of one's political competency.

The staging of this scene is a slow escalation of humiliation delivered to Would-be in his tortoise disguise, as the merchants poke, prod and threaten to jump upon the meandering beast. While this is a scene that visits a bout of comedic violence upon the body of the sycophantic stage operative, it is presented as a deeply personal attack on a particularly foolhardy traveler, intended to serve as punishment for a perceived slight against Peregrine's strong English character. Rather than producing a criticism of the underlying concerns that motivate his travels, Peregrine and the merchants attempt to punish the ways in which Would-be leverages his travels as a means of garnering social capital, localizing the violence in the threat that Would-be's narrative be "taken for truth." Here, we see a Bakhtinian vision of the carnivalesque punishment of the overly ambitious fool in the service of defanging his threat, imagining a world in which we may strike the fool to eliminate his threat to the social body. Would-be's incompetence does not absolve him of his outmoded desires for social advancement, it merely makes it easier

to punish him. Would-be can become a receptacle for the play's derision for aspirational servants who seek to feign expertise. The punishment of Would-be then becomes a larger social punishment of the poor interpreters of texts whose travel writing misleads and beguiles the English public.

The play does not merely ask audiences to contemplate how they interpret characters like Would-be and his insistence on his skillful political and social observation, but it asks audiences to reconsider the archives that they access to perform this interpretation, particularly as it locates figures like Would-be as travelers who participate in the construction of that archive. By envisioning a world in which all the promises of travel writing fail, the play contemplates the degree to which the politically ambitious servant is always stymied by the many layers of interpretation and misinterpretation that make the social discourse of the playhouse and the tavern possible. The play's concern with Would-be is that he is both wildly entranced by the prospect of political advancement through his travels and woefully gullible when it comes to matters of the *arcana imperii*. He is presented as an educated man, drawn from the lower ranks of the English nobility, but his extensive education has not schooled him in how to navigate the satirical world in which Jonson places him. This is the folly of Would-be that the play seeks to punish to prevent him from taking on the role of educator and guide to travelers and political agents less discerning than Peregrine. It is a fear of the social power possessed by the politically motivated agent that compels Peregrine to assert that Would-be must be punished. He is dangerous because he represents a desire to spread political knowledge to other potential Would-bes.

Imagining an audience filled with English subjects garnering a political education from the space of the stage is, to Jonson, to imagine a sea of miseducated Would-be Politics. Would-be becomes transformed into a self-reflexive critique on figures central to Kiséry's understanding of political competency, providing a political education on the failure of political education. Rather than the judicious political reader envisioned by theorists of travel such as Florio and Palmer, he is a boorishly poor reader of the machinations of state, who has nonetheless convinced himself that the very act of travel and observation legitimates

his reading of the political world. Would-be's notes run the risk of being understood as a legitimate representation of the arcana imperii, precisely because of how they mobilize the logics of travel writing.[35] Would-be is, to the last moment of his own punishment, deeply insistent in his belief that his notes are a register of political importance. Whatever Would-be imagines about his own notes in this moment, it is significant that he imagines that his skills of observation have produced a small measure of intelligence and that that intelligence incriminates him as a hostile foreign agent. Here, Would-be is simultaneously buying into the logic of his own project of "seeing like a statesman" and demonstrating the degree to which his "drawn out of playbook" notes fail to allow him to truly see like a statesman.

The play is not simply inviting criticisms of Would-be and his similarly educated ilk, but it is further asking audiences to consider the degree to which any political knowledge that they may possess or that those within their social sphere may profess is part of the larger sphere of political interpretation that shapes Would-be's view of the world. Rather than embracing the productive knowledge of the playhouse as a site for political education, *Volpone* is a play wary of those who profess political knowledge pieced together from an archive of politically-minded literature. While Kiséry's reading of the political discourse in the period extolls the virtues of the Habermasian social exchange of political knowledge, Jonson's play offers a bleaker view of the social potential of this mode of political engagement among nobles and commoners alike.

Notes

1. A. J. Loomie, "Wotton, Sir Henry (1568–1639), Diplomat and Writer," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. 23 Sep. 2004; Accessed 17 Feb. 2022. https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-30001.

2. For a more detailed history on anti-travel literature and its afterlives, see Sara Warneke, "Educational Travel: The Enthusiasm, the School-master and the Reaction," in *Images of the Educational Traveller in Early Modern England* (Lieden: EJ Brill, 1995), 41-73.

3. Andrew Hadfield, "Motives for Travel and Instructions for Travelers," in *Amazons, Savages and Machiavels: Travel and Colonial Writing in English, 1550-1630 An Anthology*, ed. Andrew Hadfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 11-16.

4. Mark Netzloff, *Agents beyond the State: The Writings of English Travelers, Soldiers, and Diplomats in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 40.

5. Lisa Jardine and William Sherman, "Pragmatic Readers: Knowledge Transactions and Scholarly Service in Late Elizabethan England," in *Religion, Culture, and Society in Early Modern Britain: Essays in Honour of Patrick Collinson* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 102.

6. Carl Thompson, *Travel Writing*, (New York: Routledge, 2011), 41.

7. Hadfield, *Amazons, Savages and Machiavels*, 12.

8. Noah Millstone, "Seeing like a Statesman in Early Stuart England," in *Past and Present* no. 223 (May 2014): 82.

9. Stephen Wittek, *The Media Players: Shakespeare, Middleton, Jonson, and the Idea of News* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015), 8.

10. Daniel Carey, "The Problem of Credibility in Early Modern Travel," in *Renaissance Studies* 33, no. 4 (2019): 528.

11. For one such example, see *A Relation of a Journey begun Anno Domini 1610*, a travelogue written by George Sandys, which was integral in demonstrating his skills in husbandry and governorship leading to his eventual appointment as part of the nascent Virginia Company.

12. András Kiséry, *Hamlet's Moment: Drama and Political Knowledge in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 9.

13 Kiséry, *Hamlet's Moment,* 123.

14. For a more complete history of Venice's relationship to the development of English espionage, see Christopher Anderson, *The Secret World: A History of Intelligence*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 118-140; Alison Plowden's *The Elizabeth Secret Service* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991) and Ioanna Iordanou's "The Spy Chiefs of Renaissance Venice: Intelligence Leadership in the Early Modern World," in *Spy Chiefs: Volume 2: Intelligence Leaders in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia*, ed. Paul Maddrell, Christopher Moran, Ioanna Iordanou, and Mark Stout (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2018), 43-66.

15. "Relazioni described the geography, economy, and demography, the social, religious, political, and military structures of the country visited, and offered an analysis of the nature of the regime, its domestic and especially foreign political ambitions and alliances." Kiséry, *Hamlet's Moment*, 106.

16. Hadfield, *Amazons, Savages and Machiavels*, 12. For a more detailed reading of the role of travel licenses in Volpone, see Mark Netzloff, "Jonson's Volpone and the Information Economy of Anglo-Venetian Travel and Intelligence" in *Mediterranean Identities in the Premodern Era*, ed. John Watkins, Kathryn L. Reyerson (London: Routledge, 2014), 77-79.

17. Ben Jonson, *Volpone or The Fox*, in *Ben Jonson's Plays and Masques: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Richard Harp (New York & London: Norton & Company, 2001). All further citations of Volpone are drawn from this edition.

18. For a more complete history of the mythology of Venice on the English stage, see David C. McPherson, *Shakespeare, Jonson and the Myth of Venice* (Newark: University of Delaware Press), 27-51.

19. For a more detailed history of the relevance of private collections of notes to early modern intelligence work, see Nicholas Popper, "Archives and the Boundaries of Early Modern Science," *Isis* 107.1 (2016): 86-94.

20. Mosca, for instance, notes that Corvino employs "a guard of spies ten thick upon her," to oversee his wife. (1.4.123.)

21. Andrew Hadfield, *Literature, Travel, and Colonial Writing in the English Renaissance 1545–1625* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 32.

22. Desmond O'Connor, "Florio, John (1553–1625), Author and Teacher of Languages." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. 23 Sep. 2004; Accessed 8 Aug. 2019. https://www-oxforddnb-com.libezproxy2.syr.edu/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-9758.

23. John Florio, *Second Fruits to be Gathered of Twelve Trees, of Diverse by Delightful Tastes to the tongues of Italians and Englishmen* (1591). Quoted in David McGinnis, *Mind Travelling and Voyage Drama in Early Modern England* (New York: Palgrave, 2013), 92-93.

24. For a more detailed history of the relationship between trained animals and spies, see Bill Angus *Metadrama and the Informer in Shakespeare and Jonson* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 14-16.

25. Florio was far from the only thinker to approach travel as a kind of intelligence gathering. For instance, Thomas Palmer's, *An essay of the Meanes How to Make our Trauailes, into Forraine Countries, the More Profitable and Honourable* (1606) specifically relates the traveler and the intelligencers, advising spies in a section on "regular travel."

26. Jonas A. Barish, "The Double Plot in Volpone," in *Ben Jonson's Plays and Masques*, ed. Richard Harp (New York: Norton, 2001), 399.

27. Warneke, "Educational Travel," 47.

28. Quoted in Anthony Esler, *The Aspiring Mind of the Elizabethan Younger Generation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1966), 64.

29. For a more detailed history of readings and stagings of Machiavelli, see Victoria Kahn, *Machiavellian Rhetorics From the Counter-Reformation to Milton* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 93-131.

30. Netzloff, *Agents Beyond the State*, 46.

31. Carey, "The Problem of Credibility in Early Modern Travel," 536.

32. With a possible emphasis on registered's connotation of "Recorded; officially set down, esp. in a book or list." "registered, adj. and n." *OED Online*. June 2019. Oxford University Press. https://www-oed-com.libezproxy2.syr.edu/view/Entry/161296?rskey=fHU5Tw&result=2&isAdvanced=false.

33. Ian Donaldson tracks the history of the tortoise as a symbol of political prudence in "Jonson's Tortoise," *The Review of English Studies* 19, no. 74 (May, 1968): 162-166.

34. Kiséry, *Hamlet's Moment,* 265.

35. A fear that Would-be comically announces when he shouts "bid my wife's women / to burn my papers" (5.4.60-61) worrying that the Venetian government will take the papers as proof of his threat to the state.