was “Constitution.” The Pope and his court at Rome are always described as politicians with no hint that spiritual motives played a part in their politics. Many French bishops were absentees since not only the abbeys but the bishoprics of France had become part of the governmental system. When a political statesman fell from power, the king could banish him by ordering him to fulfill the canonical requirement of residence in his diocese!

To our relief, our author occasionally mentions a model bishop who not only resided in his diocese but devoted his resources entirely to his poor. On the other hand, his bugbear, Cardinal Dubois, was an absentee and pluralist and had no right to any ecclesiastical benefice whatever, if he was hated! Dubois got some one to go down to a parish in the diocese of Limoges, distract the attention of the parish priest, and tear out from the parish register the page which contained the proofs of Dubois’ marriage. So says Saint-Simon, confessedly no friend of Dubois.

Living at court, Saint-Simon brushed up against many persons who made history, some in big things, some in small. Had Voltaire died young, we might have known no more of him than what Saint-Simon tells us, namely that his name was Arouet, that he was the son of the Saint-Simon family notary, and that he was first exiled from the court for satirical and impudent verses and later sent to the Bastille for satirical and impudent verses. To our relief, our author occasionally mentions a model bishop who not only resided in his diocese but devoted his resources entirely to his poor. On the other hand, his bugbear, Cardinal Dubois, was an absentee and pluralist and had no right to any ecclesiastical benefice whatever, if he was hated! Dubois got some one to go down to a parish in the diocese of Limoges, distract the attention of the parish priest, and tear out from the parish register the page which contained the proofs of Dubois’ marriage. So says Saint-Simon, confessedly no friend of Dubois.

Ben Jonson’s last plays, *The Devil is an Ass*, *The Staple of News*, *The New Inn*, and *The Magnetic Lady*, were not well received by contemporary audiences, and although the last two were not only total failures at the time, they have apparently never been performed on the public stage since their first, catastrophic presentations. For the 1631 edition of one of these, *The New Inn*, Jonson supplied a bitter, if amusing, title-page: “The New Inn, or The Light Heart, a Comedy. As it was never acted, but most negligently played by some, the King’s Servants, and more squeamishly beheld and censured by others, the King’s Subjects. 1629. Now, at last, set at liberty to the Readers, his Majesty’s Servants, and Subjects, to be judged. 1631.” Jonson’s statement that his play was to be “judged” is both characteristic and revealing; he always insisted that the spectator or the reader should approach his work with judgment and intelligence, that he should understand before he praised or censured. Frequently we can enjoy, after a fashion, without understanding, but with Ben Jonson this is scarcely possible, so carefully premeditated is his work, and so carefully wrought.

Following their inauspicious first performances, the fates of these last plays seemed to have been sealed by Dryden’s famous and highly unfortunate remark that they were his “dotages,” for few critics have challenged it. *The New Inn* and *The Magnetic Lady* were produced during Jonson’s last years. James I was dead, and courtly patronage, on which Jonson had earlier been able to rely, was gone. He himself was old and sick; he had suffered a paralytic stroke and was confined to his bed in a house depressingly shabby, and for nourishment he was apparently relying more and more exclusively on the Canary wine which had always been a staple of his diet. When these plays, then, very different from anything he had produced before, were presented to puzzled or indifferent audiences, they were taken, by the charitably inclined, as the last feeble performances of a sick and tired poet.

L. C. Knights, however, in his fine book, *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson*, has convincingly demonstrated the high quality of *The Devil is an Ass* and *The Staple of News*. Swinburne, the gustiest noise-making machine of nineteenth-century criticism, loudly defended *The Magnetic Lady* as one of Jonson’s most perfect plays. But among modern students, only Freda L. Townsend, in *Apologie for Bartholomewe Fayre*, has seriously attempted a defense of *The New Inn*, and while her defense is salutary, it is by no means complete; and so, following Jonson’s injunction to “understand,” I should like to present a new and, I trust, accurate reading of this almost universally maligned and misunderstood play.

No one would be justified in seriously asserting that *The New Inn* is comparable to the great plays of Jonson’s middle period, the period of those masterpieces, *Volpone*, *The Alchemist*, and *Bartholomew Fair*. *The Alchemist*, Jonson’s greatest play, is, with respect to structure, vigor of language, serious intent displayed in comic terms, genuineness of plot and situation, and fidelity to a clearly worked out theory of comedy, the greatest comic production in our language; there is nothing like it. But to say that a man, having once reached this height, is in his dotage because he did not reach it again, is to demand too much, even of Ben Jonson.

A summary of the action follows: The Lord Frampul married “Sylly’s daughter of the South,” whom he left, because of a “peculiar humor,” shortly after the birth of their second daughter. She, thinking he had gone because she had not borne him a son, left home also, resolving never to return until he should return. When he did return and found her gone, he immediately set out in quest of her, and neither of them had been heard from since, the estate remaining in the hands of the eldest daughter, Frances, Lady Frampul, “her young

Continued page 31
sister being lost.” As the play opens, Lady Frampul, having heard of a famous new inn, goes there with some gentlemen and her chambermaid Prudence, for a day’s diversion. Lovel, a melancholy guest at the inn, agrees to join the festivities. In the second act, Lady Frampul, uneasy because no other ladies are present, borrows Frank, the host’s son, and dresses him as a lady, claiming him as a kinswoman, Mistress Letitia Syly, all with the connivance of the boy’s nurse, an old charwoman at the inn. The disguise is so successful that the young Lord Beaufort, a member of Lady Frampul’s party, falls in love with him. In the meantime, a riotous crew assembles below stairs. It now develops that the main business of the day for Lady Frampul’s party is to hold a court of love, under the authority of Pru, the chambermaid, who has been elected sovereign of the day. In the third act occurs the first sitting of the court, during which it is Lovel’s duty to give a definition of love and a description of its effects. Lovel, we have learned, is in love with Lady Frampul, although she does not know it; and now, after his eloquent oration on love, she, it appears, is in love with him. At the beginning of act four, a noise below stairs indicates that a strange lady has arrived at the new inn, and has been rudely accosted by the merrymakers below. She is rescued by Lovel, whereupon it is discovered that she is in fact no lady, but one Pinnacia Stuff, wife to Nick Stuff, Lady Frampul’s tailor, and that she is wearing a new suit which had been ordered for Pru but not delivered. The tailor himself appears, dressed as a footman, and we learn that the tailor’s wife “was wont to be pre-occupied in all his customers’ best clothes, by the footman, her husband. They are both condemned and censured, she, strait like a doxy and sent home afoot.” After this interruption, the second sitting of the court of love occurs, and Lovel delivers an oration on valor, his reward for which is a kiss from Lady Frampul, as it had been also after the first oration. Lovel, afraid, and unable, to declare his love, retires in acute melancholy to his room in the inn. In the fifth act, Fly brings word that the Lord Beaufort has been secretly married in the stable to the host’s son, disguised as Mistress Letitia Syly. The host, in anticipation of Beaufort’s discomfiture, sends Pru for Lovel, to whom the impossible marriage is disclosed and the story seconded by Beaufort’s friend Lord Latimer. Beaufort and his bride enter, but when Beaufort calls for his bed to be made, the host reveals the identity of his new wife. During Beaufort’s confusion, the old nurse enters and reveals that the boy Frank is really Mistress Letitia Frampul, daughter to Lord Frampul and sister to Lady Frances Frampul, and that she herself is the girl’s mother. The host then reveals that he is the missing Lord Frampul. Thus Lord Frampul is reconciled with his wife, both of them with their children, Beaufort with his wife, and Lovel with his, since Lord Frampul bestows his daughter Frances on him. Pru is taken by Lord Latimer, “for the crown of her virtue and goodness, and all are contented.” A “new” inn indeed.

The critics have almost universally commented on the absurdity of this plot. Castelain objects strongly to the improbability of the situation and to the absurdity of holding a court of love in a Jacobean inn. But we must remember that equally improbable plots have aroused relatively less opposition—consider Beaumont and Fletcher, for example, or, for that matter, Shakespeare’s late tragi-comedies; and, as for the absurdity of holding a court of love in an inn, we can only say that if such a court is to be held at all, it might as well be in an inn as any other place. If the plot is absurd, it is no more so than are the plots of dozens of other Elizabethan and Jacobean comedies. In fact, however, what clearly stands out in this plot, as Jonson presents it, is its symbolic nature. If we take it as the realistic representation of a possible action we are of course bound to object, but if we take it as the symbolic representation of an idea, we may proceed rather easily to an examination of what Jonson was doing.

The theme of The New Inn is, with certain important variations, the theme also of the great trigadicomedies of Shakespeare—Cymbeline, The Winter’s Tale, The Tempest, Pericles—the theme of reconciliation, and, like those Shakespearean masterpieces, Jonson’s play is deeply moral, with the practitioners of folly changed, corrected, and happily reconciled.

Like all of Jonson’s comedies, The New Inn has a social purpose which is part of, and inseparable from, its moral purpose. As everyone knows, the court of love game was one of the most popular sports at the court of Charles I and Henrietta Maria, but, in this courtly context, the Platonic implications of Renaissance courtly love were frequently perverted, so that while the exalted, spiritual, ennobling aspects of love were the matter of courtly debate, the actual practice was somewhat closer to that which one might find in a high-class brothel. For this view we have the evidence of innumerable contemporary satires on “Platonick” lovers who give verbal expression to the aspirations of their souls, but who then realize these aspirations in the bedchamber or on the back stairs. Jonson has his court of love conducted above stairs in the new inn, and Lovel’s speeches on love and valor stress particularly the moral values of those emotions. As a result of these speeches, Lady Frampul (Frampul means peevish or erratic) is made to see the folly of her ways and is brought to an awareness of the exalted nature of true love. It should be said, however, that Lady Frampul’s folly is an external folly, a folly of manner rather than of conviction, so that what Lovel’s speeches actually do is simply to restore a balance and a sanity, to cause Lady Frampul to realize her moral and spiritual potentialities. Jonson, then, is setting an example for his courtly audience.
of the play the host gives us a clue when
valor, to which perhaps more than lip-
serve was paid at court, are thus idealized
in Lovel's speeches and brutalized, amus-
ingly enough, in the words and actions of
Sir Glorious and his comrades.
We must now consider the significance of
the inn itself, the stage on which these
dramas are enacted. At the very beginning
of the play the host gives us a clue when
he tells us that the inn is called The Light
Heart. And then, in Act I, scene 3, explain-
ing to the melancholy Lovel why a gentle-
man keeps an inn, he speaks as follows:
If I be honest, and that all the cheat
Be of myself, in keeping this Light
Heart,
Where I imagine all the world's a play,
The state and men's affairs all passages
Of life, to spring new scenes, come in,
go out,
And shift and vanish; and if I have got
A seat, to sit at ease here i' mine inn,
To see the comedy, and laugh and chuck
At the variety and throng of humors
And dispositions that come justling in
And out still, as they one drove hence
another,
Why will you envy me my happiness?
The inn, then, is a theatre, and the play
therein enacted is nothing less than the
world, than life itself. The idea of the
theatre as a stage, and the drama as life,
was a commonplace among Elizabethan
and Jacobean playwrights and is, in fact,
as old as Cicero. Thomas Heywood argues
in his Apology for Actors that the drama
represents a panorama of life and that
from observing the drama one may make
certain conclusions about his own life as
well, and this idea is implicit in almost in-
umerable metaphoric statements of the
drama as life. It is clear, then, that if the
inn in Jonson's play is a stage, this stage
may be reasonably assumed to be, meta-
aphorically, the world, life, so that in the
inn is enacted a comedy which offers moral
commentary, in symbolic terms, on some
aspect of life. Through observing the
flow of life in and out of the inn, Lord Fram-
pul, alias the host, and Lady Frances Fram-
pul, his daughter, lose their peevish affect-
ations. Lord Frampul's wife, née Sylly,
posing as the old nurse, loses, alas, her
silliness, and Frank, the host's son, posing
as Mistress Letitia Sylly, but being really
Mistress Letitia Frampul, becomes Lady
Beaufort. Lovel is retrieved from his des-
perate melancholy, and Pru the chamber-
maid, playing the rôle of sovereign of the
festivities in the inn, is indeed a sovereign,
as she displays her tact, discretion, humor,
and good sense, and becomes Lady Lat-
imer. Sir Glorious 'Tiptoe and his comrades,
and Nick Stuff and his charming wife
Pinnacia also play their rôles, in that the
absurdity of their words and actions pro-
vide, consistent with the Aristotelian pre-
cept, that version of the ludicrous which is
a subject of laughter, and which, as Dennis
was to say later, ought never to be imitated
in life. They are observed by the other
characters in the play and provide, in comic
terms, moral instruction, as they do also for
the other audience, in the theatre.
All of this is, in fact, not unlike what
happens in The Tempest; we have a play
the action of which is symbolic; we have
the theme of reconciliation; we have char-
acters undergoing metamorphoses as a re-
sult of their experiences or observations;
we have "low" characters who provide
both laughter and moral instruction; and
we have a particular locale which serves
metaphorically as a stage representing
the world. In Shakespeare's play we have his
best verse, technically, his crowning
achievement; in Jonson's play we have not
his best verse, but at least a verse remark-
ably appropriate to his theme, a verse at
once fluid and musical, inferior to Shake-
peare's, it must be said, but much more
than merely serviceable. Still, though,
Shakespeare and Jonson are doing differ-
ent things. Shakespeare, setting his scene
on the enchanted island, peopling it with
vaguely supernatural characters, and deco-
rating it with magic, is closer to traditional
ideas of pastoral, and, by establishing with
every means at his disposal an aesthetic
distance between the "real" world and the
world of the play, makes it much easier to
perceive the symbolic nature of his play.
Jonson had no affection for magic islands
as scenes for comedy (the masque was an-
other matter), and chose the familiar,
rather than the strange, an inn near Lon-
don rather than a non-existent magic
island, a host rather than a Prospero, a
charming Pru rather than a celestial Mi-
anda. Parts of The Tempest are sheer
magic; The New Inn is a work of great
skill and intelligence. Jonson, in his entire
conception, was almost certainly influenced
by The Tempest, but, as always, he chose
to write his own play in his own way. By
most critical standards, Shakespeare's play
is better, just as many of Jonson's own
plays are better, but The New Inn is an
excellent comedy, expertly plotted, admira-
ably constructed, abounding in interesting
and entertaining characters, with a serious
purpose which yet is communicated in a
comic context. When we reflect that it is
no Alchemist, we should also reflect that
The Tempest isn't, either.