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Cracking the Mysteries of “China”: China(ware) in the Early Modern Imagination

Jane Hwang Degenhardt

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Cracking the Mysteries of “China”: China(ware) in the Early Modern Imagination

by Jane Hwang Degenhardt

This essay explores early modern views of China as they were expressed through European representations of Chinese porcelain. Analyzing a range of artistic, printed, and dramatic texts, I show how sixteenth- and seventeenth-century western mythologies surrounding the production of chinaware offer a striking contrast to the more denigrating discourse of chinoiserie that developed in the eighteenth century. Focusing particularly on descriptions of chinaware that circulated in early modern England, I demonstrate how writers ranging from Mandeville to Hakluyt to Shakespeare and Jonson foster ideas about the mysteries of Chinese porcelain that emphasize its virtuous and magical properties. I also consider contemporary English translations of Marco Polo, the Portuguese trader Duarte Barbosa, and the Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci, as well as Italian paintings by Andrea Mantegna and Giovanni Bellini, revealing an admiration for chinaware that circulated throughout Europe. Examining the shifting ways that commodification affected perceptions of chinaware and vice versa, I draw attention to a particular period of transition over the first half of the seventeenth century when Chinese porcelain became increasingly available to moneyed English consumers. During this time, the myths surrounding porcelain's creation were both demystified and reclaimed, while on the public stage diverse perceptions of chinaware offered a way to arbitrate social competency. Throughout, I chart an early modern discourse of chinaware in relation to an evolving history of East-West trade, revealing how the mysterious origins of Chinese porcelain both resisted and played into its commodification.

THE notion that Chinese porcelain embodied a fragility that signified artifice and lack of integrity was commonplace by the early eighteenth century. In the climactic moment of Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*, for example, the severing of Belinda's sacred lock and the loss of her innocence are famously mocked through their

comparison to “rich *China* Vessels, fal’n from high . . . in glittering dust and painted fragments.”¹ As David Porter observes, the proliferation of eighteenth-century Chinese-inspired European decorative objects, or *chinoiserie*, transformed the once venerated products of an ancient and highly civilized culture into symbols of “capriciousness, folly, and illusion.”² Yet before these “rich *China* Vessels” fell, European cultures were circulating a different set of objects and discourses of the Far East. A description of chinaware in Richard Hakluyt’s second edition of *The Principal Navigations* (1598–1600) calls it “the best earthen matter in all the world” precisely because of the virtues it was characteristically understood to lack by the eighteenth century—its integrity, its beauty, and its strength.³ Prior to its mass importation and eventual manufacture in England, the porcelain teacup (now a symbol of English national culture) was thought to embody superior Chinese technology and aesthetics.

This essay uncovers a discursive history of European and, in particular, English receptions of china that preceded the denigrating discourse of *chinoiserie*. It does so by retracing the history of trade between Europe and China back to the earliest points of contact, when Chinese commodities were just beginning to enter English domestic spaces through Mediterranean trade and European re-export. Offering an interdisciplinary examination of numerous artistic, printed, and dramatic texts, I show how sixteenth- and seventeenth-century western mythologies

¹ Pope, *The Rape of the Lock* (1717), from the Twickenham edition of *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, vol. 2, ed. Geoffrey Tillotson, gen. ed. John Butt (London: Methuen and Co., 1940), canto 3, lines 155–60.

² See Porter’s influential essay, “Chinoiserie and the Aesthetics of Illegitimacy,” *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 28 (1999): 33. Recent work by Eugenia Zuroski Jenkins builds upon Porter’s conclusions by focusing on how *chinoiserie* functioned as both a positive and a negative ideal in mediating the relationship between women and their possessions in the eighteenth century. See Jenkins, “‘Nature to Advantage Drest’: Chinoiserie, Aesthetic Form, and the Poetry of Subjectivity in Pope and Swift,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 43 (2009): 75–94. On the relationship between Chinese decorative arts and female subjectivity, see also Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects: Women, Shopping, and Business in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997). For other literary discussions of eighteenth-century perceptions of China and chinaware, see David Porter, *The Chinese Taste in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), esp. ch. 7; Chi-ming Yang, “Virtue’s Vogues: Eastern Authenticity and the Commodification of Chinese-ness on the 18th-Century Stage,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 39 (2002): 326–46; Lydia H. Liu, “Robinson Crusoe’s Earthenware Pot,” *Critical Inquiry* 25 (1999): 728–57; and Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, “Women, China, and Consumer Culture in Eighteenth-Century England,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 29 (1995/96): 153–67.

³ Hakluyt, *The principal navigations*, 3 vols. (London, 1598–1600), 2 (pt. 2): 91.

surrounding the production of chinaware suggest a worldview quite distinct from that associated with the post-Enlightenment period. However, rather than emphasize a static worldview or one in which eastern superiority was steadily (or even abruptly) superseded by the ascendance of the West, the many local examples that I consider draw attention to multiple moments of dynamic transition.

Chinaware's relative inaccessibility during the early modern period fueled a mythology of Chinese mystery and exoticism that at times resembled but was not equivalent to modern Orientalist discourses of the East. Recent scholarship on European encounters with China and the Far East has established a sharp distinction between these encounters and those of a colonial or proto-colonial nature. In the words of Andrew Hadfield, "trade and profit were the principal goals, not colonization and conquest."⁴ Historical studies by Kenneth Pomeranz, K. N. Chaudhuri, and others have challenged Eurocentric histories of the early modern world predicated on progressivist narratives of the economic rise of the West.⁵ They note that China was dominant in the world economy up until 1800, whereas European nations occupied a marginalized status. Building upon this work, Robert Markley's study of English literary texts reveals "a variety of compensatory strategies" that reflect England's deep investment in Far Eastern trade as an antidote to domestic economic crises.⁶ If Europeans were mere suitors for trading

⁴ Hadfield, ed., *Amazons, Savages, and Machiavels: Travel and Colonial Writing in English, 1550–1630: An Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 189. Other studies that press for pre-colonial models for approaching constructions of the East in the early modern period include Robert Markley's *The Far East in the English Imagination, 1600–1730* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Jonathan Burton's *Traffic and Turning* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005); and Richmond Barbour's *Before Orientalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁵ Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); and Chaudhuri, *Asia Before Europe: Economy and Civilization of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). See also Andre Gunder Frank, *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); and Jack Goldstone, *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

⁶ Markley, *The Far East and the English Imagination*, 6. Other scholarship focused on English Renaissance literature and China is quite limited, though I am indebted to several critics who have taken this material in different directions, notably Alexander Huang, Timothy Billings, and Walter Lim. See Huang, *Chinese Shakespeares: Two Centuries of Cultural Exchange* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Billings, "Visible Cities: The Heterotopic Utopia of China in Early Modern European Writing," *Genre: Forms of Discourse and Culture* 30 (1997): 105–34, and "Caterwauling Cataians: The Genealogy of a Gloss," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 54 (2003): 1–28; and Lim, "China, India, and the Empire of

privileges in the Far East, then the English were virtually excluded from direct trade with China throughout the early modern period, though they increasingly imported Chinese goods through other sources.

Bearing this in mind, I examine below the nuanced ways in which the European and, in particular, the English desire for and exclusion from Chinese trade were brought to bear upon the single, highly charged commodity of Chinese porcelain. I demonstrate how China's inaccessibility prompted Westerners to project onto chinaware attributes of inestimable integrity and virtue, and how these attributes played into porcelain's value as a commodity, persisting even after chinaware became more readily available to the English in the early seventeenth century. Tracing the shifting signification of "china" and, by extension, "China" as it registered in artistic, literary, and theatrical discourses, I seek to complement economic histories of early modern global trade with an interdisciplinary cultural history. In particular I draw attention to a period of transition that took place during the first half of the seventeenth century when Chinese porcelain became increasingly available to the English as an imported commodity. During this time, the mysteries surrounding porcelain's creation were largely demystified and yet a wide range of texts forcefully reclaimed and reinvented chinaware's mystique. These texts ultimately enhanced china's commercial allure by detaching it from the process of commodification.

In examining three different sets of local texts—early Renaissance Italian paintings, seventeenth-century English printed texts, and London stage plays performed in the Jacobean and early Restoration periods—I bring to the fore three separate but interrelated discourses of chinaware that speak to its significance in distinct temporal and geographical contexts. I begin with a discussion of two Italian paintings, the first by Andrea Mantegna and the second by Giovanni Bellini, that juxtapose chinaware with religious iconography. These paintings reflect an admiration for Chinese porcelain that circulated throughout Europe and associate Chinese commodities with priceless value and a sense of timelessness that eludes human history. Then, drawing on English travel narratives by such authors as John Mandeville and Hakluyt, as well as on English translations of Marco Polo, the Portuguese trader Duarte Barbosa, and the Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci, I uncover a mythology of Chinese porcelain that circulated from the Continent to

Commerce in Milton's *Paradise Lost*," in *Sinographies: Writing China*, ed. Eric Hayot, Haun Saussy, and Steven G. Yao (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 115–39.

England and from the thirteenth century to the seventeenth. Centering on china's mysterious composition and magical properties, this mythology persisted—and even intensified—despite porcelain's growing availability in England in the early seventeenth century. Finally, moving to the most localized set of texts, I examine how the popular London stage appropriated chinaware as a marker for gauging the cultural competencies and moral principles of urban citizens during a period when London's social classes were in flux as the result of England's increasing participation in maritime trade. In city comedies by William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, and William Wycherley, chinaware represents a standard of luxury that exposes the follies of unsuccessful social climbers and the moral and sexual excesses of unrestrained consumers. By presenting this wide-ranging array of local examples, I attempt to illuminate some of the nuanced ways that western receptions of chinaware shifted in relation to global trade and to show, as well, how the specific material commodity of china conveyed notions of China across temporal and geographical boundaries.

PART I: CHINESE VESSELS IN ITALIAN PAINTINGS

The first visual representations of Chinese porcelain in the West appeared in late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Italian paintings, where its depiction in relation to Christian and pagan deities suggests its exalted virtues. The earliest paintings of china include Andrea Mantegna's *Adoration of the Magi* (ca. 1495–1505) and Giovanni Bellini's *Feast of the Gods* (1514), though it is uncertain whether the individual blue and white porcelain dishes represented in these paintings are based on Chinese originals or earthenware copies.⁷ If original, the pieces were most likely imported from China by the Ottoman empire and transported into Italy as individual gifts or as part of the limited Chinese trade that made it this far west. If copies, they were likely of Ottoman manufacture based on original Chinese designs. Regardless of the origins of these objects, their representation offers a sharp contrast to the common superfluity that chinaware assumed by the eighteenth cen-

⁷ For critical debate on the provenance of the china displayed in Italian painting, see A. I. Spriggs, "Oriental Porcelain in Western Paintings, 1450–1700," *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society* 36 (1964–66): 73–87; John Carswell, "The Feast of the Gods: The Porcelain Trade Between China, Istanbul and Venice," *Asian Affairs* 24 (1993): 180–85; and Rosamond Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza: Islamic Trade and Italian Art, 1300–1600* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).



Figure 1. *Andrea Mantegna, Adoration of the Magi (ca. 1495–1505). Distemper on linen, 48.6 x 65.6 cm. With permission from The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, CA.*

tury. The china represented in these paintings possesses a rarified dignity: it is a gift suitable for gods.

Mantegna's *Adoration of the Magi* (fig. 1) features a porcelain cup filled with gold coins as one of the gifts offered to Christ by the three wise men. The eastern king Casper, bearded and bald-headed, bows before the Christ child while gently offering up the porcelain cup in his left hand. As Rosamond Mack notes, the blue motif of flower stems and leaves on the cup "recalls flower scrolls on early fifteenth-century Ming blue-and-white," though Mantegna "may have altered the cup's shape and decoration to fit the Magus's grasp."⁸ The cup occupies the central foreground of the painting, its rim nearly touching the child's small foot. With Joseph looking on from behind her, the Virgin Mary extends the child toward the wise men as though presenting him as a gift, cre-

⁸ Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 105.

ating a kind of symmetry between the proffered Christ child and the sumptuous gifts offered by each of the three kings. The implied unity between the child and the three objects is reinforced by the child's gesture of blessing, which functions as the painting's center of focus. The other two gifts include a Turkish perfume censer made of jasper and a Persian agate cup—precious commodities indigenous to the eastern Mediterranean.⁹ Within the narrative of the painting, the exchange of eastern gifts for the gift of Christ posits the spread of Christianity to the East. Representative of the most highly prized and valuable commodities that the kings could obtain, the proffered gifts represent a humble equivalence to the inestimable gift of Christ. At the same time, the detailed particularity of these precious gifts acknowledges the way that the West benefits, economically and culturally, through Christian conversion.

If the objects in the painting advertise the three eastern kings' access to the Mediterranean trade routes, they also imply Italy's access to these routes. As Lisa Jardine has suggested, the profusion of lovingly depicted, secular detail in Italian Renaissance paintings is "as much a visual celebration of conspicuous consumption and of trade" as it is a tribute to the holy subjects of the paintings.¹⁰ Within the context of Italy's burgeoning consumer culture, the porcelain cup represented a highly desirable but not yet accessible luxury item. While considerable quantities of silk, gems, and spices entered Venice from the eastern Mediterranean in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, Chinese porcelain remained relatively out of reach. The difficulty of obtaining porcelain in Italy rendered it a valuable collector's item, bestowing prestige on its owner. As R. W. Lightbown notes in his thorough cataloguing of Far Eastern artwork in the inventories of Italian collections, porcelain had "long been known and esteemed in Venice, but even there [in the most active European port city] not many pieces" were present in the early Renaissance.¹¹ The earliest documented Chi-

⁹ According to Suzanne Boorsch, the gifts represented in the painting share certain affinities with the collecting interests of Isabella d'Este, Duchess of Mantua, who may have commissioned it (Boorsch et al., *Andrea Montegna*, exhibit catalog [New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art and London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1992], 237).

¹⁰ Jardine, *Worldly Goods: A New History of the Renaissance* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 8.

¹¹ Lightbown, "Oriental Art and the Orient in Late Renaissance and Baroque Italy," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 32 (1969): 229. See also Spriggs's useful cataloguing of depictions of Chinese porcelain in European paintings between the years 1450 and 1700, which confirms the rarity of blue and white porcelain from this period in Italian art. On imported Chinese porcelain in Renaissance Europe, see also John Carswell, *Blue*

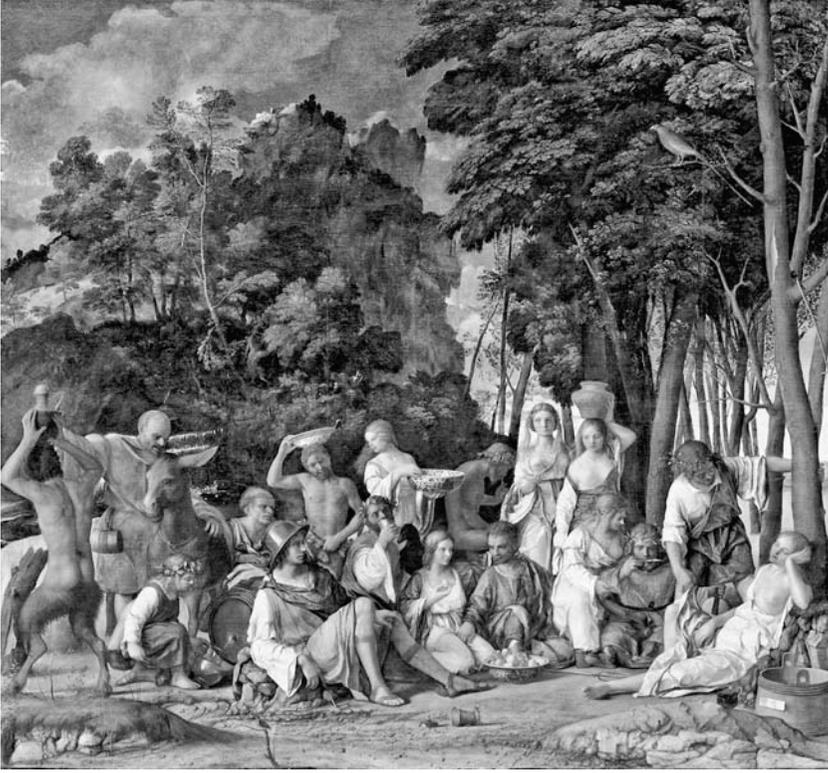


Figure 2. *Giovanni Bellini, Feast of the Gods (1514). Oil on canvas. With permission from the Widener Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.*

nese porcelain that survives in Italy dates to the 1550s. By including an object that was so rare and inaccessible to most contemporary Italians, Mantegna's painting subtly perpetuates a fantasy of Italy's access to the farthest reaches of the East.

Giovanni Bellini's *The Feast of the Gods* (fig. 2) offers an extreme displacement of porcelain vessels that simultaneously accentuates and makes light of their exalted value. Painted by Bellini in 1514 and completed by Titian (who modified the background) in 1518–29, the paint-

and White: Chinese Porcelain and Its Impact on the Western World, exhibit catalog, David and Arthur Smart Gallery (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

ing juxtaposes Chinese porcelain with ancient gods and goddesses from classical mythology rather than with Christian iconography. It features three fifteenth-century blue and white pieces altogether: one on the head of a bare-chested satyr, one in the hands of the nymph standing next to him, and one containing fruit on the ground in front of Neptune.

These china objects signify the mark of civilization, here contrasted against an antithetical state of primitivism. Their prominent and striking role in Bellini's composition, as well as their seemingly odd displacement among classical pagan gods, invites critical speculation.

Scholars have primarily focused on trying to determine the origins of the curious pieces depicted in the painting. John A. Pope was the first to identify the bowls as the type and design made in China between 1470 and 1510, a precious few of which made their way to the Venetian port and from there inland, by a variety of overland and sea routes in the early 1500s.¹² Others, including Spriggs and F. R. Shapley, have questioned whether it is possible to determine whether Bellini's Chinese bowls were based on originals or copies. John Carswell hypothesizes that the three bowls may have been given as a gift from Mehmed II to Bellini's brother, Gentile, who visited Constantinople in 1479–80. As Carswell notes, while this style of bowl was "very rare in Europe," it was "quite common in Syria, and numerous in the great collection of Chinese porcelain in the Topkapi Saray Museum in Istanbul, which once belonged to the Ottoman sultans."¹³ Mack suggests that the "large, densely painted palmettes and blossoms framed by lead scrolls and tendrils on Bellini's bowls correspond to the decoration of a late-fifteenth- and early-sixteenth-century Ming type that was exported in large quantities to Persia, Syria, and Egypt."¹⁴ It is also possible that the china bowls were a gift to Bellini's patron, Duke Alfonso I d'Este of Ferrara, or ambassadorial gifts to Venice, such as those given to Doge Barbarigo by ambassadors from the Sultan of Cairo in 1490. Bellini's patron apparently took a special interest in porcelain and attempted to order a Venetian imitation of it in the same year that he paid for *The Feast of the Gods*. Though Carswell concurs with Pope's dating of the bowls as late fifteenth century, he contends that they are decorated in a "pseudo-14th century style . . . as if the Chinese potters were speculating on what was

¹² Pope and A. J. Wenley, *China* (Washington, DC: The Smithsonian Institute, 1979). See also Pope's *A History of the History of Ming Porcelain: A Lecture* (London: Oriental Ceramic Society, 1972).

¹³ Carswell, "The Feast of the Gods," 182.

¹⁴ Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 105.

successful in their grandfathers' time."¹⁵ Given the tenuous possibilities for their origins, the representation of these particular Chinese bowls in Bellini's painting clearly derives from an exceptional, rather than a common, set of circumstances. By contrast, the china bowls' seamless integration into a classical mythological narrative translates their conspicuous singularity into something almost unremarkable.

What are Chinese bowls doing in this particular scene of Olympian gods? Why should gods from the Mediterranean have to venture so far afield as China to find suitable vessels for their feast? And why does a Renaissance painting situate these porcelain bowls as objects cast backward into an imaginary past? As Louis Hourticq first observed in 1919, the painting's literary source is a passage from Ovid's *Fasti*.¹⁶ The scene depicts an impending sexual assault just prior to its prevention. Priapus, the god of virility, can be seen on the far right raising the skirt of Lotis, who is awakened just in time from her wine-induced stupor by an outburst from Silenus's ass. Thanks to the ass's interruption, Lotis's virtue is saved, and Priapus is made a laughingstock by all the other gods. Represented in the midst of classical myth, the china bowls appear oddly out of place. Mercury is depicted with his characteristic staff; Neptune, with his trident; Ceres, with her wreath of wheat; and Silenus, with his companion the ass; but how do the china bowls fit in?

While critical discussions of the painting have focused on what we can learn about Titian's alterations to Bellini's original painting from composite x-ray technology, few have looked at the seemingly odd juxtaposition of cultural iconography that has remained constant in the painting since its first incarnation.¹⁷ Interspersed throughout the scene from classical antiquity are, in fact, several carefully depicted vessels: the Chinese bowls, an earthenware pot, late medieval beakers, a glass pitcher, a pewter cup, wooden barrels, and a typical wooden tub to the far right, which contains the inscription "joannes bellinus venetus MDXIII" (1514). In addition to constituting a varied collection, these diverse vessels offer a juxtaposition of objects ancient and new, high

¹⁵ Carswell, "The Feast of the Gods," 184.

¹⁶ Hourticq, *La jeunesse de Titien* (Paris: Hachette, 1919). Other influential source studies include John Shearman's *Only Connect . . . Art and the Spectator in the Italian Renaissance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992); and Anthony Colantuono's "Dies Alcyoniae: The Invention of Bellini's *Feast of the Gods*" (*The Art Bulletin* 73 [1991], 237–56).

¹⁷ On x-ray analysis and conservation of *The Feast of the Gods*, see John Walker, *Bellini and Titian at Ferrara: A Study in Styles and Taste* (London: Phaidon, 1956), 48–62 and 99–103; and David Bull, *The Feast of the Gods* (Chicago: Library Media Project, 1996), curated video/dvd collection.

and low, aesthetic and utilitarian, foreign and domestic, a juxtaposition that interacts with the mythological narrative of the painting in curious ways. The particular placements of the three china bowls suggest three differing notions of value: one serving a utilitarian purpose in holding fruit; one being offered by the nymph as an object in itself; and one on the head of the bare-chested satyr, paralleling the female form to the right who is holding an urn on her head. Each bowl bears a critical organizing role in terms of the painting's composition. The bowl containing the fruit serves to orient the figures seated and standing around it. The bowl being offered by the standing nymph occupies a space close to the center frame of the painting, raising the question of why a thing, rather than a person, should occupy this privileged position. And the bare-chested satyr with the bowl on his head seems to offer a mocking symmetry to the curvaceous, bare-breasted nymph standing to the right with an earthenware urn on her head. While the female form balancing an urn on her head represents a classical Renaissance type, the bare-chested satyr holding the Chinese bowl conveys a curious and perhaps humorous conflation of classicism and Chinese artisanship, as if staging a repetition with a difference, a rebirth of classical antiquity that substitutes the Chinese bowl for the classical urn.¹⁸

As previously noted, *The Feast of the Gods* also pictures a number of vessels originating in the occidental world, raising the question of what kind of relationship the Chinese bowls bear to the other vessels depicted or what kind of a repetition they might be staging. Whereas the urn on the head of the nymph represents a relatively pedestrian clay pot, the corresponding Chinese bowl on the head of the satyr substitutes the rare and precious material of porcelain. Are the Chinese bowls the most "modern" objects featured, or would the blown-glass pitcher of contemporary Venetian manufacture be considered more modern? Do the Chinese bowls suggest an intentional disruption and "modern" retelling of the classical myth? In one sense, the china bowls look to the future by showing off Ferrara's access to foreign markets and its acquisition of precious eastern goods. But in another sense, the bowls are not so much the most modern objects in the scene as the most ancient ones, coming from a highly civilized culture that both predated classical an-

¹⁸ See Elizabeth Cropper's pioneering work on the analogous relationship between vases and the female form in Renaissance painting and their joint association with the classical concepts of harmony and perfection. Note, for example, her "On Beautiful Women, Parmigianino, Petrarchismo, and the Vernacular Style," *The Art Bulletin* 58 (1976): 374-94.

tiquity and continued to produce innovative designs and technology. From the European perspective, Chinese culture was understood to be ancient and unchanging, thus imbuing the bowls with a quality of timelessness or of an existence outside of history. Perhaps in the context of Bellini's painting, the china bowl is not so much the object that does not belong as the enduring signifier, a symbol simultaneously of modernity and of a temporality that defies historicity altogether.

The significance of porcelain as an Italian collector's item may offer additional insight into the inclusion of porcelain pieces in both Mantegna's and Bellini's paintings.¹⁹ Isabella d'Este, Duchess of Mantua, who likely commissioned Mantegna's painting, was known for collecting valuable vessels, including those made of porcelain. *The Adoration of the Magi* may thus have offered a visual sampling of the range of her collection. Similarly, the porcelain bowls featured in *The Feast of the Gods* may have constituted one distinct type of vessel within a larger collection. Bellini's patron—brother to Isabella—specifically commissioned *The Feast of the Gods* for display in his *camerino* or private collection space. All of the paintings commissioned by the duke for this space included vessels of various kinds, indicating that these representations of vessels may have constituted a kind of collection in themselves. Chinese porcelain proved a particularly valuable collector's item because of its rarity and exotic origins and because it represented an unusual type in terms of its material composition. As evidenced by a treatise on the social virtues of "splendor" written by the Naples-based humanist Giovanni Pontano in 1498, a collection's value was partly dependent on its variety, which was more important than its size: "It is not necessary, indeed, that there should be many cups resplendent on the dresser, but that these should be of various types. Some should be in gold, silver and porcelain; and they should be of different forms. . . . Of these some should seem to be acquired for use and for ornament, and others for ornament and elegance alone."²⁰ Mantegna's and Bellini's paintings pay tribute to china as a particularly valuable item in an Italian collection—valuable precisely because of its utter lack of superfluity.

¹⁹ Here I am indebted to the work and generous conversation of Monika Schmitter. See Schmitter, "Virtuous Riches: The Bricolage of *Cittadini* Identities in Early Sixteenth-Century Venice," *Renaissance Quarterly* 57 (2004): 908–69.

²⁰ Pontano, "Il trattato dello Splendore," *I libri delle virtu sociali* (1498), as translated by Evelyn Welch, "Public Magnificence and Private Display: Giovanni Pontano's *De Splendore* (1498) and the Domestic Arts," *Journal of Design History* 15 (2002): 215.

PART II: ENGLISH TEXTS ON CHINA(WARE)

Prior to the arrival of Portuguese traders in China in the mid-sixteenth century, European awareness of China was mainly limited to singular accounts such as those of Polo and Mandeville. Fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century English narratives of China were few and far between, with the exception of a small number of translations such as Richard Pynson's 1520 translation of Frere Hayton's *La fleur des histoires de la terre d'Orient* (ca. 1307).²¹ This relative dearth of material does not, however, reflect a lack of interest in China or in its valuable commodities. Likely containing the earliest purported firsthand account of China by an English writer, Mandeville's *Travels* appeared in the mid-1300s and by the year 1400 had been translated into every major European language.²² The popularity of Mandeville's narrative attests to European audiences' thirst for information about China and other distant places, as well as to the particular desirability of eastern trade.

Modern readers most readily associate Mandeville's narrative with fantastical descriptions of foreign and exotic places and beings, but the narrative is explicitly oriented around a desire to encourage future travels, and in particular trade, by drawing attention to the ways that Europeans might benefit through active interchange with other places and cultures. Above all, Mandeville's descriptions of "Cathay" (complexly related to China through association and frequent conflation²³)—its natural landscape, its people, its culture, and its material technologies—emphasize its abundance and the superiority of its civilization. These impressions of Chinese splendor frequently center not only on the beauty and richness of the country itself, but on the appeal of Chinese commodities:

²¹ Hayton, *Here begynneth a lytell cronycle*, trans. Richard Pynson (London, 1520).

²² As C. W. R. D. Moseley notes, more than three hundred manuscripts of Mandeville's *Travels* have survived whereas only about seventy of Polo's *Divisament dou Monde* are extant (John Mandeville, *The Travels*, ed. and trans. Moseley [London: Penguin, 1983], 10). Whereas Mandeville's text appeared quite widely in English translation by the late 1300s, the earliest English translation of Polo's text appears to be John Frampton's *The most noble and famous travels of Marcus Paulus* in 1579.

²³ For a discussion of the relationship between "China" and "Cathay," see Billings, "Caterwauling Cataians," 5. Billings offers a persuasive argument for treating Cathay ("Cataia") as a discursive construction distinct from China. He draws attention to how the "Cataian" might have referred in the late 1590s not to "lying Chinese," as the term has later been glossed, but to deceitful Europeans, such as Mandeville and even Frobisher, whose grandiose tales of Cathay smacked of falsity. Nonetheless, medieval writers such as Polo as well as many Renaissance readers and writers, including Matteo Ricci, identified Cathay and China as the same place.

The land of Cathay is a great country, beautiful, rich, fertile, full of good merchandise. Every year merchants come there to get spices and other sorts of merchandise—they go there more frequently than they do elsewhere. You should understand that the merchants who come from Venice or Genoa or other places in Lombardy or the Greek Empire travel by land and sea for eleven or twelve months before they get to Cathay, the chief realm of the Great Khan.²⁴

By offering his readers the example of European merchants who travel to Cathay “more frequently” than to any other place, Mandeville emphasizes the tremendous desirability of Far Eastern commodities that would compel merchants to travel so far. However, in calling attention to the long and arduous journey over land and sea, he also reveals the relatively small scale of trade between Europeans and the Far East in the mid-1300s. Although the Ottoman empire imported a substantial volume of commodities from China in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries that sometimes made their way into the western ports of Venice and Genoa (and into a small number of European paintings), Northern European trade with China was almost nonexistent during this time. Nonetheless, medieval and early Renaissance depictions of China in books and artwork present China’s appeal in terms of trade—an appeal often projected onto the rare and mysterious materiality of porcelain or “china.”

Perhaps the earliest surviving European description of Chinese porcelain is contained in Polo’s late thirteenth-century *Divisament dou Monde*. Whereas in the Italian paintings, porcelain may seem to exude a timeless quality, here it is characterized by its dependence on a lengthy temporal process—simultaneously disrupting the immediate profit that it can yield its creator and increasing its eventual value as a commodity:

Let me tell you further that in this province, in a city called Tinju, they make bowls of porcelain, large and small, of incomparable beauty. . . . These dishes are made of a crumbly earth of clay which is dug as though from a mine and stacked in huge mounds and then left for thirty or forty years exposed to wind, rain, and sun. By this time the earth is so refined that dishes made of it are an azure tint with a very brilliant sheen. You must understand that when a man makes a mound of this earth he does so for his children; the time of maturing is so long that he cannot hope to draw any profit from it himself or to put it to use, but the son who succeeds him will reap the fruit.²⁵

²⁴ *The Travels*, trans. Moseley, 141.

²⁵ Marco Polo, *The Travels*, trans. Ronald Latham (London: Penguin, 1958), 238.

There is something both matter-of-fact and wondrous about Polo's description of china dishes maturing out of "mounds" of dirt that are gradually shaped over many years through the effects of "wind, rain, and sun." While the process of making china involves a kind of mystical transformation, it is a process attributed solely to nature and removed from a practical or commercial agenda. Though revered for its technology and artifice, porcelain constitutes a wonder of nature unavailable to its immediate human creator. The transformation of dirt into refined porcelain eludes human observation and understanding not because it happens instantaneously but because it happens so gradually. Further, because the transformation cannot be rushed, it necessarily benefits future generations rather than the individual who initiates it. Thus, china's creation is portrayed by Polo as carefully and lovingly undertaken, associated with the act of gift-giving rather than with self-gain or profit. And yet, like the later paintings of Mantegna and Bellini, Polo's description also hints at ways in which porcelain's resistance to immediate commodification ultimately enhances its value and desirability as a commodity.

When in 1557, the Chinese authorities allowed the Portuguese to fortify the island of Macao in the mouth of the Pearl River below Canton, European trade with China vastly expanded.²⁶ From that point on, European contact and interest in China rapidly increased, and between 1570 and 1600, many Europeans besides the Portuguese began to trade in the Indian Ocean.²⁷ Though English merchants did not trade directly with China, they purchased Chinese imports from other European merchants and had by the late sixteenth century made significant advances in entering the Middle Eastern markets of the Mediterranean, where they obtained luxury imports from a variety of eastern origins.

²⁶ For a detailed history of trade between Europe and the East, see Philip D. Curtain, *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). For a useful and succinct account of the Portuguese trade in Chinese porcelain, see *Portugal and Porcelain* (exhibit catalog), New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, Nov. 19–Feb. 3, 1985. For a collection of essays surveying the relationship between overseas European exploration and developments in the visual arts, see *Circa 1492: Art in the Age of Exploration*, ed. Jay. A. Levenson, exhibit catalog, National Gallery of Art (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991).

²⁷ As Niels Steensgaard has discussed, the demise of the transcontinental caravan trade and subsequent rise of the European shipping companies at the end of the sixteenth century also marked a major turning point in East-West trade relations, significantly expanding the Northern European shipping trade with the Far East (*The Asian Trade Revolution of the Seventeenth Century: The East India Companies and the Decline of the Caravan Trade* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974]).

As Robert Brenner has detailed, England underwent a commercial revolution beginning in the late sixteenth century as a result of its declining cloth export trade and its growing reliance on foreign imports from the Mediterranean, the Far East, and the New World.²⁸ By 1609, English citizens could peruse and purchase a wide variety of imported luxury items in the proliferating shops along the Strand, later known as the New Exchange, though as David Baker cautions, the Exchange was viewed at the time as a risky endeavor and England's foothold in global trade was far from sturdy.²⁹

While it is important not to overestimate the extent of the European presence—and especially the English presence—in the Indian Ocean's sixteenth- and seventeenth-century trade community, the volume of porcelain imported into Europe during this time period was quite substantial. Oliver Impey estimates that in the last quarter of the sixteenth century Europeans imported "hundreds of thousands of pieces" per year, which were then re-exported throughout Europe.³⁰ As Chaudhuri has noted, chests loaded with porcelain were extremely heavy and helped to provide the necessary ballast for ships.³¹ The Portuguese carrack *Santa Catarina*, captured by the Dutch in the Straits of Malacca in 1604, carried some 200,000 pieces alone. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Dutch took over the Eastern monopoly from the Portuguese and with it the import of porcelain to Europe. In an important historical study of porcelain and British consumerism, Robert Batchelor estimates the number of Chinese and Japanese porcelain pieces imported into Amsterdam in the first half of the seventeenth century at three million.³²

²⁸ Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution: Commercial Change, Political Conflict, and London's Overseas Traders, 1550–1653* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993). Brenner offers a detailed history of the factors that enabled England's penetration of the eastern markets and the impact of the great joint stock companies.

²⁹ Baker, "'The Allegory of a China Shop,' Jonson's Entertainment at Britain's Bourse," *English Literary History* 72 (2005): 159–80. For a contemporary account of the New Exchange, see John Stow, "The Temporal Government of London, The Haberdashers," *A Survey of the cities of London and Westminster* (London, 1755), 11, A4v. Stow's *Survey* appeared in a number of editions in the early seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

³⁰ Impey, *Chinoiserie: The Impact of Oriental Styles on Western Art and Decoration* (New York: Charles Scribner & Sons, 1977), 92.

³¹ K. N. Chaudhuri, *The Trading World of Asia and the English East India Company, 1660–1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 406–7.

³² Batchelor, "On the Movement of Porcelains: Rethinking the Birth of Consumer Society as Interactions of Exchange Networks, 1600–1750," in *Consuming Cultures, Global Perspectives: Historical Trajectories, Transnational Exchanges*, ed. John Brewer and Frank Trentmann (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2006), 96.

Despite a lack of direct trade between England and China, the late 1500s and early 1600s represented a period of intensified English interest in Chinese commodities and unprecedented access to them. Although the English remained a relatively insignificant presence in the arena of global commerce, they strove to maximize their opportunities in the Near Eastern Mediterranean trade and to imagine themselves in the image of the Portuguese and the Spanish, who had reached the Far East and the New World long before. Numerous sixteenth-century printings of Mandeville's *Travels*, a popular stage play (now lost) based on the *Travels*, and reproductions of Mandeville's text in both Richard Eden's *Historie of Travaile* (1577) and the first edition of Hakluyt's *The Principal Navigations* (1589) attest to the English appetite for tales and geographical information about this faraway land. Polo's travel narrative was printed in English for the first time in 1579, translated by John Frampton from a Spanish edition.³³ Its title page advertised it aggressively as "Most necessary for all sortes of persons, and especially for traouellers." In addition, small pamphlets like *The Strange and Marueilous Newes from Chyna* (1577) began to circulate in London in the late sixteenth century. Like other putatively firsthand accounts of China, this pamphlet was originally written in Spanish for a continental audience and then translated into English for London publication.

The English translation and circulation of Spanish and Portuguese narratives of China in the late sixteenth century suggest both an emerging interest in "news of China" and a general dearth of firsthand information. Excerpts from Mandeville's *Travels* were included in Hakluyt's 1589 first edition of *The Principal Navigations* but omitted from the second edition. By the time that Hakluyt published his second edition in 1598–1600, he was able to replace Mandeville's accounts of China with several more recent narratives of Chinese exploration, including those of the voyages of Martin Frobisher "for the discovery of Cathay"³⁴ and a 1590 treatise on China by an unknown author. In 1588, Robert Parke's English translation of Juan Gonzalez de Mendoza's Spanish history of China, *The Historie of the Great and Mightie Kingdom of China*, was published in London. Of course, even these more recent descriptions of China were characterized by seemingly farfetched and grandiose claims about Chinese splendor and abundance. Mendoza would be-

³³ Frampton, *The most noble and famous travels of Marcus Paulus . . . into the East partes of the world* (London, 1579).

³⁴ Hakluyt, *The principal navigations*, 3:29 ff.; for the full range of Frobisher's voyages including all reports, see 3:29–96.

come famous for authoring the first detailed western history of China, and yet, having never visited the country, he based his observations entirely on secondhand accounts. Although the body of English publications about China was growing, it consisted mainly of older material recycled from Mandeville and Polo and of translations of Spanish and Portuguese texts.

For practical purposes, European missionaries and traders frequently collaborated with one another to pursue their seemingly incompatible objectives in China. Jesuit missionaries often relied upon the aid of merchants to strategize ways of infiltrating the Chinese borders and were even known to travel to China on Dutch (Protestant) merchant ships. In the early 1550s, Francis Xavier (born Francisco de Jaso y Azpilicueta) solicited help from Portuguese traders and merchants stationed off the coast of China to attempt entry into the mainland, and other missionaries like Michele Ruggieri tried to smuggle themselves into Canton during the semiannual public fairs attended by Portuguese traders. Included in Frampton's 1579 English translation of a text by Bernado de Escalanta is the original dedication to the archbishop of Seville, which contrasts China's advanced civilization with its unenlightened religious practices. Escalanta describes the Chinese emperor as "geven to idolatrie, and in that way most vaine," but insists that China's natural resources and technologies, as well as its highly civilized government, social systems, and arts, are so superior that "no other nations . . . seeme to passe them."³⁵ The idea that a pagan culture might be so worthy of European emulation provided a bit of a conundrum for Christian Europeans. As Walter Lim puts it, "The prosperity and venerable age of Chinese civilization . . . generated wonder and an impulse for emulation, but with an attendant anxiety hinged upon how it was that a heathen land could have obtained the benefits believed dispensed only to God's own faithful."³⁶

THE MAGIC AND MYSTERY OF CHINESE PORCELAIN

While Europeans faulted the Chinese for ascribing value to false idols, their attempts to apprehend and describe porcelain china reveal their own struggle to negotiate competing notions of value. Hakluyt's second edition of *The Principal Navigations* (1598–1600) contains a mysteri-

³⁵ Frampton, *A discourse of the navigation which the Portugales doe make to the realmes and provinces of the east partes of the worlde* (London, 1579), 4.

³⁶ Lim, "China, India, and the Empire of Commerce," 119–20.

ous treatise on China, which features a provocative description of that most treasured of commodities, Chinese porcelain. In his preface Hakluyt describes the manuscript as “printed in Latine in *Macao* a citie of *China*, in China-paper, in the yeere a thousand five hundred and nine-tie, and . . . intercepted in the great Carack called *Madre de Dios* two yeeres after, inclosed in a case of sweete Cedar wood, and lapped up almost an hundred fold in fine calicut-cloth, as though it had been some incomparable jewel.”³⁷ Thus itself ascribed with an air of wonder and mystique, the manuscript contains an enumeration of valuable Chinese commodities, including gold, silk, spices, cotton-wool, and porcelain. The manuscript’s description of porcelain expresses the author’s deep admiration for Chinese technology and aesthetics:

Let us now entreat of that earthen or pliable matter commonly called *porcellan*, which is pure white, & is to be esteemed the best stuffe of that kind in the whole world: wherof vessels of all kinds are very curiously framed. I say, it is the best earthen matter in all the world, for three qualities; namely, the cleannesse, the beauty, & the strength thereof.³⁸

Revealingly, the contents of this precious manuscript encased “almost an hundred fold in fine calicut-cloth” consist not of a rare “jewel” but of a list and description of Chinese commodities. Part of what made the list comparable to a “jewel” was the rare value of the goods that it contained. Indeed, the European author’s description of porcelain idealizes its practical and aesthetic qualities without the slightest hint of irony. Thus, while late sixteenth-century Europeans valued Chinese commodities over the “misguided” practice of Chinese idolatry, their descriptions of these commodities also betray an admiration for Chinese aesthetics and technology that bordered on fetishization.³⁹

As Hadfield has observed, descriptions of European encounters with China were far more extensive in Samuel Purchas’s 1625 *Purchas his Pilgrimes* than in Hakluyt’s earlier compendium, primarily because *Purchas* was not limited to English voyages and included a number of Jesuit accounts.⁴⁰ For example, a letter written by the Spanish Jesuit Diego

³⁷ Hakluyt, *The principal navigations*, 2 (pt. 1), *4r.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 2 (pt. 2), 91.

³⁹ William Pietz’s articles on the origin of the “fetish” in the late sixteenth-century trading spaces of the West African coast provide a useful model for understanding how the devaluation of “illegitimate” religious idols enabled the emergence of a European subject who was defined by his ability to recognize the “true value” of the object-as-commodity (“The Problem of the Fetish, I” *Res* 9 [1985]: 5–17, and “The Problem of the Fetish, II,” *Res* 13 [1987]: 23–45).

⁴⁰ Hadfield, ed., *Amazons, Savages, and Machiavels*, 190.

De Pantoia lauds the Chinese for having the best, most plentiful, and cheapest porcelain: "They have the best Porcelane that hitherto hath beene found, which is exceeding good cheape, and in such plenty, that besides all the Kingdome of China doth furnish it selfe thereof, they send forth as many ships ladings as they will."⁴¹ A similar example may be found in Ricci's journal, first compiled by Nicholas Trigault in 1615 and excerpted by Purchas in 1625 for an English readership.⁴² Like other Jesuit accounts of Chinese culture, Ricci's diary contains extensive observations about Chinese mechanical arts and commodities. Though he attempts to characterize china's properties within a scientific or mechanistic language of causality, Ricci cannot escape a note of wonder at its innovative technology:

There is nothing like it in European pottery either from the standpoint of the material itself or its thin and fragile construction. The finest specimens of porcelain are made from clay found in the province of Kiam, and these are shipped not only to every part of China but even to the remotest corners of Europe where they are highly prized by those who appreciate elegance at their banquets rather than pompous display. This porcelain, too, will bear the heat of hot foods without cracking and, what is more to be wondered at, if it is broken and sewed with a brass wire it will hold liquids without any leakage.⁴³

The strength, resilience, and self-mending capacities of such a delicate and fragile substance deeply impressed European missionaries, who were seeing Chinese porcelain for the first time and had little understanding of how to manufacture it. Ricci's observation of how this material stands up to "the heat of hot foods without cracking" testifies to its sophisticated technology, and "what is more to be wondered at," its ability to be sewn together if broken and continue to "hold liquids without any leakage" was virtually miraculous. Further, since Chinese porcelain was prized by "those who appreciate elegance at their banquets rather than pompous display," it was praised for its sophistication, refinement, and integrity—quite antithetical to the associations of

⁴¹ As quoted by *ibid.*, 198.

⁴² Purchas, *Purchas his Pilgrimes* (London, 1625), part 2, book 2, chaps. 5, 7, and 8.

⁴³ Ricci, *China in the Sixteenth Century: The Journals of Matthew Ricci 1583–1610*, trans. Louis J. Gallagher, forward by Richard J. Cushing (New York: Random House, 1953), 14–15. Ricci's diary was first published in Italian in 1615. In Purchas's rendering, Ricci's description of Chinese porcelain is limited to the following: "The vulgar vse earthen dishes, called, I [k]now not why, *porcellane*; the best whereof is made in the *Kiamsin* Prouince of a yellow earth. It endureth without riuing [ruining] hot meates, yea as wooden dishes here with a wyre, they sowe the rifts and make them hold liquor" (*Purchas his Pilgrimes*, part 2, book 2, ch. 7, p. 382).

decadence, superficiality, and brittleness that would characterize the eighteenth-century view of *chinoiserie* in England.

As demonstrated by Ricci, Europeans regarded Chinese porcelain with a certain investment in its miraculous and mysterious properties. As late as 1633, Cristoforo Borri described a Chinese method of blood-letting that made use of the unique properties of a porcelain-covered goose quill. According to Borri, the goose quill is attached to “diuers little pieces of Porcelane that are very sharpe, fashioned and placed like the teeth of a Saw, some greater, and some lesse.”⁴⁴ To draw blood from a patient,

they apply one of these quills thereunto, and giuing a little stroake thereon with their finger, they open the Veine with the Porcelane, which entereth no further then is requisite. But that which is yet more strange, is, that when they haue drawen Blood sufficiently, they vse no band, nor Ligature about it: but onely wetting their thumbe with a little spittle, they presse it on the wound, and make the skin returne to his place, the Blood suddenly stanching, and the ouerture closing together: Which I attribute to their opening of it with the Porcelane, which maketh the Veine to close vp, and to heale so easily.⁴⁵

Here, we see that porcelain has the ability not only to heal itself but also to heal a wound that it cuts in human skin. By attributing the staunching of blood and “closing together” of punctured skin to the porcelain “teeth” used to open the vein, Borri gives praise not only to the superior technology of Chinese porcelain but to its miraculous power to heal.

In addition to this curative power, porcelain was also believed to bestow upon the food or liquid that it contained a magical immunity to poison. As Thomas Browne notes in his seventeenth-century survey of Renaissance lore on the making of porcelain, some of the unique properties attributed to china dishes include “that they admit no poison, that they strike fire, [and] that they will grow hot no higher than the liquor in them ariseth.”⁴⁶

Unable to replicate Chinese porcelain or understand how it was made, early modern Europeans unabashedly recycled old, erroneous theories and generated a series of new ones. Polo’s thirteenth-century explanation for the making of china was not significantly updated by the time Frampton published his English translation in 1579. Specula-

⁴⁴ Borri, *Cochin-China containing many admirable rarities and singularities of that countrey / extracted out of an Italian relation, lately presented to the Pope* (London 1633), G1v.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, G1v.

⁴⁶ Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, 6th ed. (1672), book 2, chap. 5, no. 7: 98. On porcelain’s appealing attributes for early modern Europeans, see also Lightbown, “Oriental Art and the Orient,” 229.

tions about china's origination and composition led to heated controversies. Far from guessing that porcelain's strength could be derived by firing clay at sustained and controlled high temperatures, Europeans surmised that it must have been made out of eggshells or bones, or else some liquid substance.

A particular controversy developed in the 1550s in response to the translation of Barbosa's travelogue, which introduced the idea that porcelain was formed underneath the ground.⁴⁷ "It is certain," wrote Gerolamo Cardano in 1550, "that porcelain is likewise made of a certain juice which coalesces underground, and is brought from the East."⁴⁸ In 1557, Julius Caesar Scaliger surmised that chinaware was made from shells that were pounded into dust, reshaped, and then buried. Like Polo, Scaliger hypothesizes that the maturation process for porcelain takes longer than a human lifespan:

They are made in this fashion. Eggshells and the shell of umbilical shellfish (named porcelains, whence the name) are pounded into dust, which is then mingled with water and shaped into vases. These are then hidden underground. A hundred years later they are dug up, being considered finished, and are put up for sale.⁴⁹

In fact, Scaliger describes a process even more mysterious than Polo's, suggesting that the making of porcelain takes one hundred years rather than thirty or forty and that it happens underground rather than above ground where its exposure to the elements might be observed. For Scaliger and others who subscribed to the burial theory, the transformation of shells into porcelain exceeded the powers of human observation and comprehension. However inaccurate the theory, there was a true magic to these products of the East, a magic not divorced from the reality that the "mysteries" (as the guilds were called in England) could not understand *these* mysteries and thus were unable to reproduce the technology themselves.⁵⁰

Significantly, the earliest English term used to denote china, "porce-

⁴⁷ On the controversy between Cardano and Scaliger, see Lightbown, "Oriental Art and the Orient," 230; Batchelor, "On the Movement of Porcelains," 99–100; Impey, *Chinoiserie*, 89–90; and Gordon Elliott, *Aspects of Ceramic History*, vol. 2 (Eton: Gordon Elliott, 2006), 45–48. For Barbosa's description of porcelain, see Giovanni Batista Ramusio, "Libro di Odoardo Barbosa," in *Navigazioni e Viaggi*, vol. 2, ed. Marica Milanese (Torino: Einaudi, 1978), 694–95.

⁴⁸ Cardano, *De subtilitate rerum* (Nuremberg, 1550), 100v–101r. Quoted from Lightbown, "Oriental Art and the Orient," 230.

⁴⁹ Scaliger, *Exotericum exercitationum* (Paris, 1557), 135v–136r. Quoted from Lightbown, "Oriental Art and the Orient," 231.

⁵⁰ *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (hereafter *OED*), s.v. "mystery," def. n² 3.

lain," derives from the Old French "porcelaine," meaning "vanus shell, cowrie, or similar univalve," embodying the fallacious assumption of Scaliger and others that china was made from shells.⁵¹ But Scaliger's account also suggests the possibility that Europeans took pleasure in the very mysteries surrounding porcelain, which encouraged these imaginative hypotheses. Clearly, china's mysterious composition and production contributed to its allure. The unobservable and therefore amazing transformation of common "egg shells" and the "shells of fish" into china dishes was imagined as preceding a second, more abrupt transformation in which the dishes were "dug up" and immediately "put up for sale." European authors such as Giovanni Botero noted how seashells, "which some men terme *Porcelline*," were themselves used as currency in places such as China, India, and Ethiopia.⁵² In a sense, Scaliger's account of porcelain obscures the potentially awkward juxtaposition between European conceptualizations of value located in the magical properties of a material and the transformation of material objects into monetary or exchange value. According to Batchelor, the "double nature" of porcelain as a self-making material and consumed commodity attains comprehension through a "parallax view."⁵³ In another sense, the monetary value of porcelain was sometimes understood to be entirely separate from and incommensurate with its artistic and technological qualities. As Pontano noted in 1498, "There are some that prefer the tiniest little vase of that material which they call porcelain to vases of silver and of gold even though the latter are of higher cost. It does happen occasionally that the excellence of the gift is not judged so much by its cost, as by its beauty, its rarity, and its elegance."⁵⁴ This sense that porcelain's value could not be translated into monetary terms because of its uniqueness as a medium of art endured well into the sixteenth century, accompanied by theories of its mysterious production and nature.

The early decades of the seventeenth century marked a significant turning point in the English discourse of Chinese porcelain. During this period competing explanations for how to manufacture china began to circulate in England, some doubting the burial theory or the belief that it originated from egg or seashells. Robert Parke's translation of Men-

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, s.v. "porcelain," def. n and adj, etymology.

⁵² Botero, *Relations of the most famous kingdomes and common-wealths thorowout the world* (London, 1630), 501.

⁵³ Batchelor, "On the Movement of Porcelains," 99.

⁵⁴ As translated by Welch, "Public Magnificence and Private Display," 212.

doza suggested that pieces of earth were ground and “put into cisterns with water”; and Francis Bacon contended that porcelain was “artificial cement” that underwent a process of “induration” when “buried in the Earth a long time.”⁵⁵ Edward Grimstone’s 1615 English translation of Pierre d’Avity’s *The estates, empires, & principallities of the world* sets forth two distinct possibilities. It first asserts that porcelain vessels

are made of a kind of earth which they breake in peeces and steepe, pouring it into pooles which are walled about, & paved with free stone: hauing dissolved it wel in the water, they make the finest vessell of the fattest of the earth which swims about: and as for the rest the more it goes to the bottome the grosser and thicker it is: They giue it what forme they please, & then gild it and put it into any colour, the which is neuer lost, and then they bake it in an ouen.⁵⁶

While this explanation details a transparent step-by-step process that might be replicated anywhere and by anyone, it remains circumspect about the “kind of earth” from which porcelain first originates. Is this type of dirt or clay unique to China? Are its properties open to scientific explanation or are they supernatural in nature? Drawing on Barbosa, d’Avity adds that

Some hold that the Porcelaine vessel is made of eggshells broken, and kept one hundred yeares in the ground, or else of the shells of sea snailles, the which they steepe and lay in the ground to be refined for the like time, as one *Edward Barbosa* hath written. But if that were true, there should not be such great store of Porcelaine in China, neither should they transport so much into Portugal, Perou, New Spaine, and other parts of the world.⁵⁷

Here, d’Avity acknowledges the belief that porcelain was made of broken shells buried underground for a hundred years, but he reasons that such a belief seems inconsistent with the “great store” of porcelain in China as well as the volume transported out of the country into disparate geographical locations. His reasoning seems to suggest a link between rejecting the fantastical hundred-year burial theory and recognizing the mass manufacture and commercial export of chinaware to global markets.

Similarly, a manuscript authored by Peter Mundy between 1634 and 1637 notes the waning of the popular mythological explanation for chinaware in relation to its increased production as a commodity

⁵⁵ Mendoza, *The Historie of the Great and Mightie Kingdom of China*, trans. Parke (London, 1588), 22–23; and Bacon, *Sylva sylvarum: or A naturall historie* (London, 1626), 26.

⁵⁶ Grimstone, trans., *The estates, empires, & principallities of the world* (London, 1615), 722.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

for western import. He explains that while some believe that porcelain pieces

should ly 100 yeares undergrounde before they come to perfection, soe that hee that begines them Never sees their end, butt leaves that to his posterity after him, I could hear Nothing of this Nowadaies. Good drinking cuppes att 1d and 1 1/2d, and Fruitt Dishes att 2 1/2d each; the rest according to that rate, For a whole barsa, which is 2 tubbes, will cost 28 or 30 Ryall eight, and they usually contain about 600 peeces little and great.⁵⁸

Mundy's abrupt transition between noting the disappearance of the old explanation and providing the current prices for both individual pieces of chinaware and bulk purchases is telling. It seems the mythological explanation is incompatible with perceptions of china as an exported commodity.

But in other ways the mythology may be seen to work in accordance with and to enhance the perceived value of chinaware. Europeans continued to be drawn to the idea of porcelain's magical transformation—unseen, and over a long span of time—long after chinaware entered European markets in sizable quantities. The sellers' retention of this erroneous theory seems to be partly willful, suggesting that preserving china's mysterious production enhanced its appeal and profitability. Just as alluring as the notion that porcelain derived from shells that magically transform underground was the sense that it served posterity by virtue of its long maturation process. In 1635, Gerhard Mercator offered the following explanation for how china was made:

They mingle Sea snales or Periwinkles, with egge-shells, and putting some other things to them, they beate them till they become one substance. Then they lay it under the ground, and there they let it lye to season and ripen 80. or 100. yeare, and they leave it to their heyres as a precious treasure, so that they commonly do come to use that which their Grandfathers first laid to ripen. And it is an ancient custome observd amongst them, that he that takes away the old must lay new in the place.⁵⁹

By emphasizing how the making of china benefited not the maker but his heirs, such descriptions separated the production of porcelain from its commercial orientation and the idea that it was made for profit. Further, these descriptions indicated that porcelain's production not only

⁵⁸ Mundy, *The Travels of Peter Mundy, in Europe and Asia, 1608–1667*, vol. 3, pt. 1, ed. Richard Carnac Temple (London: Hakluyt Society, 1919), 305.

⁵⁹ Mercator, *Historia mundi: or Mercator's atlas Containing his cosmographicall description* (London, 1635), 868.

linked generations but also was continuously perpetuated by an “ancient custome” whereby each generation replaced what it took from the last by giving to the next.

The cyclical process attributed to ancient Chinese custom became a familiar touchstone for describing maturation processes that exceeded the human lifespan, as exemplified by a 1638 poem by Charles Aleyn. In a passage celebrating the wedding of Margaret Tudor (daughter of Henry VII) and James IV of Scotland in 1502, Aleyn suggests that the union signified the eventual marriage of England and Scotland under their grandson King James. Political alliance on this momentous scale, however, was not to be rushed: “It is a worke of Time,” the speaker reminds Margaret and James,

there cannot be
The spring-time in your Age, and Harvest too,
Your Age the seede, the next the blade shall see,
A third the Eare. Thus China Grandsires doe
Bury their Porcellan dishes in the ground,
Whose profits but to their sonnes heires redound.⁶⁰

To Aleyn, the production of china—a valuable commodity planted by one selflessly farsighted generation for the benefit of their descendants two generations later—offered the best analogy for his era’s most mythologized act: genealogical nation-building. The comparison with chinaware figures Margaret as a kind of productive commodity, a bride-seed planted in what was once hostile ground to grow by mysterious means over two generations. After time, the poem argues, this seed will become that exponentially more valuable commodity, England’s new spouse Scotland. Incorporated into England’s sense of imperial identity, the misunderstood production of china is thus pressed into the service of both commercial and national agendas, transforming the willful ignorance that perpetuated such mythologies into something of value. At the same time, the English were still genuinely perplexed by the technology of porcelain and were unable to manufacture it themselves until the eighteenth century. Such uncertainty inflated the value of china in the English cultural imagination as well as on the European market—conditions that benefited the Chinese at England’s expense.

By the time Browne came out with the sixth and final edition of his *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* in 1672, Europeans were still “not thoroughly re-

⁶⁰ Aleyn, *The historie of that wise and fortunate prince, Henrie of that name the seventh, King of England* (London, 1638), 142.

solved concerning porcelain or china dishes," though Browne was able to include an account of a Dutch visit to China in 1665, which purported to discredit the burial myth once and for all.⁶¹ Contrasted against the magical and indeed miraculous properties associated with china in earlier editions of the *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, this ambiguity seems to epitomize the transition that took place over the course of the seventeenth century as china's association with magic was debunked and yet its precise scientific explanation still remained out of reach. In the early decades of the seventeenth century Dutch potters had begun to produce delftware, tin-glazed pottery that was a good imitation of porcelain. Dutch delftware was even exported to China, allowing Chinese porcelain manufacturers in turn to imitate and appropriate European designs for export back to Europe. However, the secret of creating true hard-paste porcelain eluded European manufacturers until 1710, when the Meissen works near Dresden brought to market the first European porcelain. Cracking this mystery radically changed the way that china signified in English cultural discourses and yet, as we shall see, china continued to hold onto some of its mysteries into the Restoration period.

PART III: CHINAWARE IN THE LONDON THEATER

When chinaware first began to be referenced in the popular domain of the English public theater, it signified as an exotic and misunderstood material that was nonetheless perceived to be increasingly available to English consumers. As Linda Levy Peck has demonstrated, chinaware's acute desirability was part of a larger growth in English desire for luxury goods that was created by global trade and attendant developments in domestic retail shopping, print, travel, and education.⁶² In turn, early seventeenth-century consumer demand was instrumental in driving and transforming the English economy.⁶³ During this time, as Peck shows, the meaning of "luxury" underwent transformation and expansion in England, as it largely shed its connotations of immorality and sin and assumed associations of gentility, fashion, respectability, emulation, and refinement.⁶⁴ In Jacobean city comedies, the comic de-

⁶¹ Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, 98.

⁶² Peck, *Consuming Splendor: Society and Culture in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁶³ On consumer demand, see David J. Baker, *On Demand: Writing for the Market in Early Modern England* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

⁶⁴ Peck, in *Consuming Splendor*, 112.

ployment of china may seem to reflect the early stages of its devaluation, but closer consideration reveals how the theater exploits china's status as the height of luxury to expose the muddled uses that low characters make of it.

While, as I have shown above, china's increasing availability in English households works to demystify it, china assumes a new sort of mystification on the stage as a kind of secret code that is intelligible only to those who are capable of discerning true from false luxury and value. Notably, china constituted an absent presence on the stage—its availability implied but never physically materialized as a prop because its expense put it beyond the reach of any theater company. As if commenting on the false perception of china's attainability, the stage exploited chinaware for its susceptibility to misreading by the fools, gulls, and gallants who populated London city comedies. These plays seem to demonstrate that despite both china's apparent ubiquity and the apparent social mobility available to citizens in a city newly transformed by global trade, china's ultimate unattainability and unreadability marked a division between those with true class and those who simply aspired to have it. Just as China represented a place that the English marveled at but could barely locate, Chinese porcelain was a commodity that English citizens desired but could barely lay claim to.

In Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* (1604), for example, Pompey the clown refers to dishes that "are not China-dishes" but "good dishes" nonetheless:

Sir, she came in great with childe: and longing (sauing your honors reuerence) for stewd prewyns; sir, we has but two in the house, which at that very distant time stood, as it were in a fruit dish (a dish of some three pence; your honours haue seene such dishes) they are not China-dishes, but very good dishes.⁶⁵

Although the clown insists that his are "good dishes," the joke is that they cannot possibly be anything like "china-dishes," which would cost considerably more than "three pence" and were owned neither by middling English households nor by London theater companies. Similarly, the idea that such fine dishes should hold "stewed prunes," notorious for being served in houses of prostitution to prevent venereal disease, demonstrates Pompey's bungled mimicry of high culture. As in Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*, Chinese porcelain is invoked to debase something else to which it is being compared but in a totally opposite

⁶⁵ Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, in *Mr. William Shakespeares comedies, histories, & tragedies* (London, 1623), 2.1.90–95.

way. Whereas the “fragments” of shattered “China vessels” in Pope’s mock epic poem are offered as a parallel to the meaningless and overblown “rape” of Belinda’s lock and the debasement of her sexuality, the fine “China dishes” invoked in *Measure for Measure* constitute an extreme contrast to the common dishes found in English households, as well as to the play’s thematic concern with “common” women and sexual promiscuity.

In a somewhat similar way, Jonson’s *Epicoene* (1609) employs the ability to properly value chinaware as an arbiter of social taste and cultural competence. The play is acutely concerned with mapping distinctions of taste among London’s moneyed citizenry, demonstrating that economic status did not necessarily guarantee social status. As Adam Zucker argues, *Epicoene* exemplifies a new “logic of power organized around cultural competence,” which is “informed by the expansion of a market for nonessential commodities.”⁶⁶ Set in London’s fashionable West End, in and around the Strand and the New Exchange, the play constructs cultural competence largely through its characters’ relationships to objects and spaces. Similar to *Measure for Measure*, the play incorporates chinaware in the mocking of a social climber’s bungled mimicry of high culture. The critique is oriented around Captain Tom and Mrs. Otter, a husband and wife whose constant bickering centers on Mrs. Otter’s attempts to correct her husband’s crude manners. A member of the emerging and newly moneyed middling class, Captain Otter is a merchant of land and sea (as mockingly caricatured by his last name), and his parvenu wife, Mrs. Otter, runs a successful china shop in the West End. The play ridicules Mrs. Otter’s social aspirations by exposing her constant, misguided attempts to curb her husband’s behavior so as to make a better impression on their neighbors. Moreover, her own inability to discern distinctions in cultural value is exposed through the irony of her profession as a purveyor of imported china—a luxury item whose value she cannot comprehend beyond its monetary worth.

In an extension of this irony, Mrs. Otter’s efforts to manage her husband’s behavior center on the question of appropriate drinking vessels. Confronted with her husband’s desire to show off his collection of carousing cups, which take the shapes of a bear, a bull, and a horse, Mrs. Otter chastises, “Is a bear a fit beast, or a bull, to mix in society with

⁶⁶ Zucker, “The Social Logic of Ben Jonson’s *Epicoene*,” *Renaissance Drama* 33 (2004): 42. See also his *The Places of Wit in Early Modern English Comedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), ch. 2.

great ladies? Think i' your discretion, in any good polity."⁶⁷ While fashionable in Jacobean London, Captain Otter's zoomorphic cups serve as visual references to his former occupation as a bearwarden and as more general reminders of the sport of animal baiting—a central metaphor throughout the play. As Juana Green observes, "For Mrs. Otter, the carousing cups signify her husband's slovenliness and drunkenness, characteristics that expose his lower-class origins."⁶⁸ Significantly, Mr. Otter has married his wife for her money and in exchange has implicitly agreed to cede control over the household and its properties. Mr. Otter's continued subservience to his wife, expressed most overtly through his customary address of her as "princess," demonstrates how the power of money can trump that of gender but also how the class system replicated within their marriage does not quite mesh with the privileged social hierarchy involving more subtle distinctions of discriminating taste and wit. No matter how much money Mrs. Otter has, she will never be a "princess" nor even an urbane citizen equal in status to Truewit, Dauphine, or Lady Haughty. Mrs. Otter's efforts to police her husband's favorite drinking vessels demonstrate her unsuccessful attempts to ape the pretensions of people higher in the social order.

If *Epicoe* exposes issues of cultural competency through the Otters' relationship to the carousing cups, it also extends this critique by implicitly locating the carousing cups in a context of imported commodities.⁶⁹ For example, as Green notes, the fact that the carousing cups exemplified a German style of metalwork known as "Nuremberg plate" and were not of English manufacture alluded to a "conflict among retailers of foreign plate and the Goldsmiths' Company between 1600 and 1620."⁷⁰ Most likely, the cups featured in the play were English imitations. The very fact that Nuremberg metalwork was so susceptible to cheap imitation, and widely displayed in London households and taverns, worked to debase its cultural capital, causing it to signify the middle-class aping of courtly pretensions rather than mark authentic status. Similarly, the silver dishes that the Otters supply for the wedding dinner served by La Foole gestured toward valuable metal imported

⁶⁷ Jonson, *Epicene, or the Silent Woman*, ed. Richard Dutton (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 3.1.17–19.

⁶⁸ Green, "Properties of Marriage: Proprietary Conflict in *Epicoe*," in *Staged Properties in Early Modern Drama*, ed. Jonathan Gil Harris and Natasha Korda (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 271.

⁶⁹ For a discussion of Jonson's *Entertainment at Britain's Bourse* in relation to the opening of the Royal Exchange and attendant anxieties about Eastern trade, see Baker, "The Allegory of a China Shop," 159–80.

⁷⁰ Green, "Properties of Marriage," 265.

from the New World, thus alluding to the Otters' affluence and courtly aspirations. However, like the carousing cups, the silver featured in the play—both as a literal stage prop and as a representational object—was likely an inauthentic copy.

In a different way, I would argue that the play implicitly sets the contested value of Captain Otter's carousing cups against the imported chinaware upon which Mrs. Otter makes her living. Green quotes a passage from Thomas Heywood's *Philocothonista* itemizing "diverse and sundry sorts"⁷¹ of drinking vessels in order to make the point that the Captain's carousing cups signified his position within a "cultural matrix of London material life,"⁷² but what she does not comment upon is how Heywood sets the zoomorphic cups in relation to the most cherished vessels of all: porcelain. According to Heywood, "I have seene [cups] made in the forme or figure of beasts, as of Dogges, Cats, Apes, and Horses. . . . But the most curious and costly, either for Workmanship, or Metall ["material"⁷³], are brought from China."⁷⁴ Significantly, Mrs. Otter's china shop and its porcelain wares—real or imitation—never appear on the stage in *Epicoene*, reflecting both the erasure of the commodity culture that frames the play and porcelain's resistance to European imitation. Mrs. Otter's exaggerated concern with the social value of objects, projected onto her obsession with her husband's carousing cups, exposes her inability to discern the value of the china that she sells. Porter, whose brief reading of the play focuses on how china functions as a vehicle for illicit desire, interprets the china-house as a site of seduction and sexual commodification.⁷⁵ By contrast, I emphasize how china and its proper interpretation function in this play as a gauge of English cultural competence. Baker arrives at a similar conclusion in his reading of Jonson's 1609 masque, *Entertainment at Brittain's Burse*, a text that lies outside my present focus on public theater.⁷⁶ Challenging critics who read the masque as a simple celebration of English mercantilism, Baker argues that references to China and its commodities conjure an awareness of English belatedness and ignorance set implicitly against China's commercial dominance and epistemic su-

⁷¹ Heywood, *Philocothonista, or, The Drunkard, Opened, Dissected, and Anatomized* (London, 1635), F3r.

⁷² Green, "Properties of Marriage," 264–65.

⁷³ OED, s.v. "Metal": def. n. II.7, refers to "Material, matter, substance, fabric; esp. clay or earthen material"; cf. "china-metal."

⁷⁴ Heywood, *Philocothonista*, F3v.

⁷⁵ Porter, *The Chinese Taste in Eighteenth-Century England*, 137.

⁷⁶ Baker, "The Allegory of a China Shop."

periority. Because the masque was staged on the premises of the Burse itself, its performers were surrounded by a proliferation of the Chinese objects that they described. For Mrs. Otter, the china remains an absent presence, its value registered only in terms of the money that it fetches, which in turn enables her to hobnob with the upper class. In short, she cannot discern the distinctions in cultural value between Mr. Otter's carousing cups and the fine china that has made them rich. Thus, the play expresses a different form of ambivalence about global trade and the social mobility that it produces by exposing the essential discrepancy between having money and having social knowledge, taste, and wit. At the same time, as Jason Scott-Warren has argued, it critiques those whom Mrs. Otter aspires to emulate by drawing parallels between the uncivil socialites of the West End, who operate through mockery, cruelty, and violence, and the bear-gardens where Tom Otter collected his carousing cups.⁷⁷

Jonson seeks to locate his own creative productions and authorial identity on a similar spectrum of cultural value in his 1623 poem "An Epistle Answering to One that Asked to be Sealed of the Tribe of Ben." Although this poem is more concerned with the conditions of writing for a court audience than for a public one, it offers valuable insights into how Jonson measured his own craft in relation to both other dramatists and the predilections of audience members by using ceramic clay as a metaphor. Proclaiming his refusal to be influenced by the gossip of the tavern scene or by the news controversies that preoccupy other masquers of the period, Jonson suggests that he and the young followers "sealed of his tribe" retain a self-contained and autonomous integrity. He realizes, however, that this posture of detachment might compromise his livelihood, causing him to

Lose all my credit with my Christmas clay
 And animated porcelain of the court;
 Aye, and for this neglect, the coarser sort
 Of earthen jars there may molest me too:
 Well, with mine own frail pitcher, what to do
 I have decreed; keep it from waves and press,
 Lest it be jostled, cracked, made nought, or less;
 Live to that point I will, for which I am man,
 And dwell as in my centre as I can.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Scott-Warren, "When Theaters Were Bear-Gardens: Or, What's at Stake in the Comedy of Humors," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 54 (2003): 63–82.

⁷⁸ Jonson, "An Epistle Answering to One that Asked to be Sealed of the Tribe of Ben," ed. Ian Donaldson, *Ben Jonson: Poems* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975).

In referring to himself as a “frail pitcher” among the “animated porcelain” (ornate and showy courtiers) and “earthen jars” (“coarser” members of the court), Jonson negotiates his artistic and moral autonomy among other courtiers and within a system of patronage that rendered him vulnerable. His metaphor of a “frail pitcher” emphasizes his vulnerability but also understands it to be a function of his rare integrity and thus a sign of his superiority to other members of the court. As with the substance of fine china, Jonson’s core exhibits fragility and virtue as interfused qualities, each a function of the other, though as Jonson’s disdainful reference to “animated porcelain” might suggest, china could also be misused or perverted by the Mrs. Otters and showy courtiers of the world.

Given his self-professed artistic commitments to plain style, honesty, and moral integrity, Jonson refers to “animated porcelain” and “the coarser sort of earthen jars” in a manner that disparages other masquers who create ostentatious entertainments and also put themselves on public display or crudely engage in gossip and bear-baiting tactics. As critics such as David Riggs have noted, Jonson had fallen out of favor with the court by 1623 and was also engaged in a fierce rivalry with Inigo Jones, whose elaborate set designs Jonson’s poem invokes with its later reference to “friendships . . . built with Canvasse, paper, and false lights.”⁷⁹ Ian Donaldson glosses the poem’s references to ceramic objects as expressions of Jonson’s anxiety about “the danger of his supersession at court.”⁸⁰ The reference to losing credit with his “Christmas clay” may refer practically to the earthenware Christmas boxes used by apprentices and servants to collect monetary contributions at Christmastime and metaphorically to the royal patronage that playwrights received for courtly entertainments. Despite the threat to his livelihood, Jonson resolves to “dwell as in my centre as I can,” a principle reinforced by the simple integrity of the self-contained vessel, its solid and rounded shape (perhaps also a reference to Jonson’s rotundity).

If on some level, Jonson’s ceramic metaphors reference the idea that all human beings are made of clay, his emphasis falls not on their commonality but on the distinctions that he draws between them. Alluding to both the authors and audiences of masques and the different kinds of masques and royals who performed in them, these metaphors suggest different uses of clay—whether showy, crude, or frail yet centered—as

⁷⁹ David Riggs, *Ben Jonson: A Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 264.

⁸⁰ Donaldson, ed., *Poems*, 209.

well as different capacities for discerning distinctions of aesthetic and moral value, for understanding the difference between outer show and inner integrity. In addition to expressing the poet's resentment at audiences who have abandoned his art for empty spectacle and frivolous gossip, Jonson's epistle may also tell us something about why ceramic clay offered a fitting metaphor for marking these distinctions in 1623. While "the coarser sort of earthen jars" were common and easily manufactured in England, Chinese porcelain remained a costly luxury that the English could not themselves produce. At the same time, Chinese porcelain's increasing availability to those who could afford it raised the threat of its potential debasement through ostentatious or improper use. Far from being a passive or static object of consumption, ceramic clay and its shifting spectrum of value (from coarse earthenware to fine porcelain) actively helped shape Jonson's distinctions of social worth.

Both Jonson's poem and play reflect particular moments in the history of English receptions of porcelain when chinaware retained a sense of exalted virtue and immunity to reproduction but was increasingly imported and integrated into wealthy homes. The sense of mystery that many Europeans still associated with Chinese porcelain enhanced its value as a commodity, though the discourse of mystery now competed with other discourses that aimed to demystify china's production or to sully its use. Certainly, porcelain's esteemed value and association with discriminating tastes did not spontaneously disappear the moment that Europeans began producing china on their own. Even in seemingly clear-cut representations of porcelain's devaluation, it is possible to perceive more complicated connotations, particularly if we look for continuities with the early modern history of china. For example, in William Wycherly's *The Country Wife* (1675), the word "china" functions as code for male sexual potency in what has become known as the famous "china scene,"⁸¹ but implicit in the play's use of this code is the likelihood that "china" constituted not a mere equivalence to the protagonist's indiscriminate spending of semen but possibly its opposite—his hotly desired sexual potency.

When Horner and Lady Fidget emerge from Horner's china closet, where Lady Fidget admits to "toiling and moiling for the prettiest piece of china," Squeamish confesses to wanting some of Horner's "china," too (4.3.187). Horner proclaims that his "china" has been all used up on

⁸¹ Wycherly, *The Country Wife*, ed. James Ogden, New Mermaids, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1991), 4.3. All subsequent references to *The Country Wife* are from this edition and will be cited parenthetically within the text by act, scene, and line.

Lady Fidget, but Squeamish suggests that perhaps there is still a bit left. In turn, Lady Fidget replies that if Horner had reserved any, she would have taken that, too, “for we women of quality never think we have china enough” (4.3.201–2). Horner then closes the discussion by saying, “Do not take it ill, I cannot make china for you all” (4.3.203). Clearly, the word “china” stands in here for Horner’s sexual stamina, which makes cuckolds of these women’s husbands and is thus associated with deception, debauchery, and illicit pleasure. In one sense, although Lady Fidget and Squeamish place a high value on Horner’s “china,” its capacity to regenerate over time may cheapen rather than enhance its value—thus offering a contrast to earlier narratives of china’s mystical incarnation. Certainly, by 1675, china was beginning to assume negative associations related to its cheap reproduction. Markley even speculates that the china in Horner’s closet represents “the stuff of a knock-off trade: cheaply produced and marked up for red-haired barbarians.”⁸² However, we might also consider the possibility that the choice of the word “china” signifies in ways that are innocuous or even antithetical to the licentious activity going on in the china closet. Whereas Porter has persuasively read china’s function in *The Country Wife* as “a token of emasculating feminine libido,” I briefly consider what it might mean to read china as a point of contrast to debased sexuality rather than as synonymous with it.⁸³ In a larger sense, I want to suggest that the shift between exalted discourses of china and debased discourses of *chinoiserie* did not constitute an abrupt and absolute break. Rather, china continued to function as an arbiter of proper taste and discernment into the Restoration period.⁸⁴

In *The Country Wife*, as in *Epicocene*, china constitutes a social code that divides those in the know from those who remain in the dark and are the butt of laughter. Its literal effectiveness as a codeword that is indecipherable to the cuckolded husbands would have been enhanced by its extreme contrast to the licentious activity going on in the closet. Could it be possible that the word “china” conjured not merely cheap knock-offs but also inimitable works of art? Michael Neill has in fact argued that many of the signs in *The Country Wife* actually denote their

⁸² Markley, *The Far East in the English Imagination*, 191.

⁸³ Porter, *Ideographia: The Chinese Cipher in Early Modern Europe* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 184.

⁸⁴ Here I am in accordance with Jenkins’s insistence on the positive associations that still adhered to Chinese porcelain even into the eighteenth century (“‘Nature to Advantage Drest’”).

opposites, tying into the play's larger concern with deception and the discrepancies between outward signs and inward honor.⁸⁵ In the context of this reading, Horner's promiscuous spending of his manhood is paradoxically emblemized by such refined domestic objects as china vases. It seems also possible that the indeterminate value of "china" in this play—potentially cheap and valuable at the same time—mirrors the value of Horner's potency, which despite its abundance is nevertheless highly valued by his ladies.

On the one hand, the temptation to equate the representation of commodified china in *Measure for Measure* and *Epicoene* with *The Country Wife* exemplifies the dangers of anachronistically imposing modern Orientalist or capitalist narratives onto the past. But on the other hand, potential continuities between early and late seventeenth-century English depictions of china objects open up the possibility of a more nuanced understanding of chinaware's late seventeenth-century significance. Even the emergence of European *chinoiserie* in the early eighteenth century, which critics have associated with the advent of western imperialism in the Far East, retained aspects of porcelain's earlier virtuous associations. Recalling china's role as an arbiter of cultural competency on the Renaissance stage, *chinoiserie* functioned partly as an index of urbane accomplishment and civilized society. Thus, even though china was (re)made by Europeans in the eighteenth century, it carried the weight of its past incarnations. Any consideration of western valuations of porcelain must trace the story back to the earliest points of East-West contact, when the china that entered early modern Europe was miraculously unblemished, uncommon, and "un-crackable."⁸⁶

University of Massachusetts Amherst

⁸⁵ Neill, "Horned Beasts and China Oranges: Reading the Signs in *The Country Wife*," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 12, no. 2 (1988): 3–17.

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