

LITERATURE

EPICOENE AND THE CRAFT OF COMEDY

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It would be enough to read only the prologues to Ben Jonson's comedies to establish the attitudes of Jonson the man towards humankind and the aims of Jonson the playwright. Jonson's comedy, deservedly, acquired the label of satirical comedy. His satire, although sometimes harsh and bitter, has nothing to do with misanthropy and pessimism. This is not mankind that he hates. His attention is focused on self-ignorance and self-deception, the vices that lead man to degeneration. His plays are peopled with individuals — courtiers, nobles, squires, merchants, simple minded citizens and state representatives — whose lack of self-knowledge and human ethos is the flaw that disables them to see the degree of their depravity. Following Socrates, who maintains that "virtue is knowledge" and "no one errs willingly", Jonson tries to awaken men and open their eyes, to make them conscious of themselves and others and to see the human values that preserve humanity. The formula is simple. He cures through laughter. So he tells the truth with a smile, ridicules vices and follies and shows his audience what to avoid.

When she [comedy] would shew an image of the times,
And sport with human follies, not with crimes,
Except we make them such, by loving still
Our popular errors, when we know they're ill.
I mean such errors as you'll all confess,
By laughing at them, they deserve no less:
Which when you heartily do, there's hope left then,
You, that have so grac'd monsters, may like men.

*(Every Man in his Humour, Prologue)*¹

¹ All quotations are from the 1956 edition of *Ben Jonson's Plays*, vol. 1, published by J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd.

Mixing "profit with pleasure", he advocates reason as the ideal state of mind to create a better, dignified existence. In the Prologue to *Volpone* he says:

Here is rhyme, not empty of reason.
This we were bid to credit from our poet,
Whose true scope, if you would know it,
In all his poems still hath been this measure,
To mix profit with your pleasure;

He addresses the audience immediately as he wants to point out his serious intentions; the public is expected to understand and appreciate his art — "the seasoning of a play is the applause". The author's reward is the audience's attention. This enables them not only to evaluate the "genuine merits" of a play, but to grasp the moral message. Their intelligence is sometimes complimented, if not flattered. Jonson makes sure from the very beginning that his audience think favourably of the play, like in the case of *Cynthia's Revels*:

If gracious silence, sweet attention,
Quick sight, and quicker apprehension,
The lights of judgement's throne, shine any where,
Our doubtful author hopes this is their sphere;
And therefore opens he himself to those,
To other weaker beams his labours close,
[...] his Muse her sweetness hath,
She shuns the print of any beaten path;
And proves new ways to come to learned ears:
Pied ignorance she neither loves nor fears.

The significance of *Epicœne* in the Jonsonian canon is rather peculiar. Together with the two earlier humour comedies² it constitutes a small group of comedies deliberately planned to amuse the audience. In the Prologue Jonson promises a banquet contrived to please "the guests'" taste; to provide general contentment, disregarding instruction, summons and hectoring.

Truth says, of the old art of making plays
Was to content the people; and their praise
Was to the poet money, wine, and bays.

But in this age, a sect of writers are,
That, only, for particular likings care, ~
And will taste nothing that is popular.

With such we mingle neither brains nor breasts;
Our wishes, like to those make public feasts,
Are not to please the cook's taste but the guests'

² The two humour comedies are *Every Man out of his Humour* and *Every Man in his Humour* whose original versions were published in the Quatro editions in 1600 and 1601 respectively. *Epicœne's* first Quarto edition is dated 1609.

Moreover, the "dishes" served will suit a multifarious public, they will:

Be fit for ladies: some for lords, knights, 'squires;
Some for your waiting — wench, and city — wits;
Some for your men, and daughters of Whitefriars.

We are presented with two prologues in *Epicœne*. However, the second one, or just *Another* as it is called, is not a mere continuation of the main Prologue. It has more in common with other Jonson's prologues. Here, the familiar idea of mixing "profit with pleasure" recurs:

The ends of all, who for the scene do write,
Are, or should be, to profit and delight.
And still't hath been the praise of all best times,
So persons were not touch'd, to tax the crimes.
Then, in this play, which we present tonight,
And make the object of your ear and sight,
On forfeit of yourselves, think nothing true:
Lest so you make the maker to judge you.
For he knows, poet never credit gain'd
By writing truths, but things, like truths, well feign'd.

As the author says, nothing is true; things are feigned but not improbable. The obstinacy of mind or disposition, a kind of rigidity which delimitates man by keeping him strictly to one path exists not only in the world created in the play. There are two characters in *Epicœne*, who are constantly made fun of, Daw and La'— Foole. Being perfect comic types, automata who cannot be reformed, unconscious of their foolishness, they are the laughing stock both for other characters of the play and the audience. Jonson manifests through them the essential ludicrousness of man submitted to his follies which ends up in the contrast between the assumptions about what man thinks himself to be and the sordid actuality of what he really is. Slight flattery is enough to manipulate them according to one's wish:

Tut, flatter them both, as Truewit says, and you may
take their understandings in a purse — net. They'll
believe themselves to be just such men as we make them,
neither more nor less. They have nothing, not the use
of their senses, but by tradition.

(*Epicœne*, III, i(v))³

The two "brave heroic cowards" who perfectly fit the *miles gloriosus* pattern make no trouble for Dauphine, Clerimont and Truewit in organizing the intrigue. The plotters decide to "hold up the emulation betwixt Foole and Daw,

³ There can be found two systems of scene division in various editions of Ben Jonson's works. In 1616, following Plautus and Terence, he adopted a new system in which the entrance of a new character marks a new scene. This system is observed e.g. in Herford and Simpson's edition; the new numbering of scenes is given in brackets.

and never bring them to expostulate" in order to have "excellent fit of mirth".⁴ We deal with a similar situation and motivation in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* when Sir Toby plays with the sham bravery of Sir Andrew and Cesario — Viola and forces them to fight a duel. In both cases the outcome is the same: cowardice is revealed to the merriment of others. However, Foole and Daw do not, and cannot, due to the assigned rigidity, profit from their lesson. Truewit in the last speech of the play commands them to "go, travel [...] and come home with some new matter to be laughed at".⁵ The world represented by Daw and Foole is static. The ridicule does not change them, in fact none of the characters in the play undergoes any change — they are supposed to be enjoyed as comic elements. Although the laugh here is not satirical but rather benign, yet we may feel the author's intention of teaching us, by simple depiction of follies, how to avoid being foolish and ignorant.

Epicoene is a comedy of intrigues whose action may be briefly described as a series of overlapping games of wit played at the expense of most of the characters in turn. It is *Volpone* which is regarded the best, and in fact it is the most discussed, of all Jonson's comedies. However, Herford and Simpson, so far Jonson's most thorough editors, in the second volume of their edition of Jonson's works express an opinion that *Epicoene* surpasses *Volpone* in technique. Hardly a single person in the play is insignificant and finally, while pursuing their own ends, all are drawn into the main intrigue and made instruments in its consummation. In the precision of plot building and in the matters of time and place *Epicoene* is as strictly ordered as *Volpone*, but in coherence and compactness it even surpasses it.⁶

The underestimate of *Epicoene* may be, partly at least, due to the traditional criticism that the motive of a nephew's endeavours to inherit his uncle's fortune is insignificant and trivial. However, even if the theme itself is not powerful and impressive something else can be added to enhance its value. Even a trivial motive can be developed into a valuable work of literature by proper structuring.

We are presented with two "parties" in *Epicoene*. On one side, we have Morose, a wealthy man who hates any noise or sound even, on the other, Dauphine, his nephew and only heir. Morose being convinced that Dauphine and his company are the authors of all "the ridiculous Acts and Monuments [that] are told of him" decides to disinherit his nephew. Since Dauphine is "next of blood, and his sister's son", the only way to do this is by getting married. Here the conflict starts. In fact we deal with double single conflict. (1) Morose wants to disinherit Dauphine and Dauphine tries to remain the

only heir; (2) Dauphine wants to remain the only heir and Morose tries to disinherit him. The resolution of the conflict depends upon Morose's and Dauphine's overcoming the obstacles.

Following the tagmemic theory,⁷ according to which the minimal de-marcative building block of the construction (tagmeme) subdivides into (1) a function (F) and (2) all of the units which may manifest this function (M), we can look at *Epicoene* in terms of functions and their manifesting units. From the point of view of Dauphine two mutually exclusive possibilities exist. He can either inherit his uncle's fortune (F¹) or get disinherited (F²): These are manifested by two units: to stop Morose from getting married (M¹) or to let him get married (M²), respectively. In the case of Morose the situation is similar. To let Dauphine inherit the fortune (F¹) means to refrain from getting married (M¹) and to disinherit him (F²) means to get married (M²). In both cases the relation between functions and their manifesting units is the same so the structure may be schematized as follows:

(F ¹) inherit	(M ¹) not get married
(F ²) not inherit	(M ²) get married

This structure may be called the real structure of the play. However, we deal with another one, the plot structure. In order to protect himself from being disinherited, Dauphine organizes a plot. Having learnt about his uncle's intentions he disguises a young boy as *Epicoene*, the presumed silent woman who soon after the betrothal appears to be a talkative creature. The desperate Morose is willing to do anything for Dauphine if he only frees him of this "unhappy match absolutely, and instantly". After Dauphine has obtained the written assurance of his perfect rights as Morose's only and immediate heir he reveals the true nature of *Epicoene* and the marriage is pronounced unlawful. To achieve his aim Dauphine has to force Morose to marry the very *Epicoene*. So the plot structure demands the function "to inherit" (F¹) being manifested by the unit "to get married" (M¹) and the function "not inherit" (F²) by the unit "not get married" (M²). The relations of functions and their manifesting units in plot structure are just reverse to those in the real structure. This brings about an identity of manifesting units of these two structures.

Real structure

(F ¹) inherit	(M ¹) not get married
(F ²) not inherit	(M ²) get married

Plot structure

(F ¹) inherit	(M ¹) get married
(F ²) not inherit	(M ²) not get married

⁴ *Epicoene*, III, i(v).

⁵ *Ibid.* V, i(viii).

⁶ Cf. Herford and Simpson's edition of Jonson's works, vol. 2; p. 71f, p. 81.

⁷ Cf. Heller and Macris, 1970, chpt. 3.

(M¹) of the real structure equals (M²) of the plot structure and (M²) of the real structure is identical to (M¹) of the plot structure.

Because the action of *Epicoene* deals with "getting married" and not "not getting married" the second identity is more important. Two equal units manifest two different functions. But one of the functions, the (F¹) of plot structure, is not perceived by Morose — this fact marks the comic potentiality of the play. Neither other characters nor the audience are aware of the correlation above. They are kept in ignorance till the end of the drama. Everyone is played a trick upon and involuntarily drawn into the main intrigue.

Volpone's point of touch with *Epicoene* is the motive of legacy. Again, we have two opposing "parties" here, *Volpone* and his clients, the "birds of prey". However, they differ in motivation. *Volpone's* clients stick to his house in hope of being made the heir of a wifeless and childless but wealthy man. They all expect to gain some profit. *Volpone*, spoiled by his fortune, thinks only of an amusement. Being quite aware of their true motives he decides to play with the hopes of "the vulture, kite, Raven, and gorcrow, all my birds of prey", and the only profit he wants to obtain is pure fun:

What should I do,
But cocker up my genius, and live free
To all delights my fortune calls me to?
[...] playing with their hopes.
And am content to coin them into profit,
And look upon their kindness, and take more,
And look on that;

(*Volpone*, I, i(i))

So he decides to pretend being on his death bed and thus have a good time. The function here (F¹) is to get amusement and its negative correlative (F²) not to get it. They are marked by two appropriate manifesting units: (M¹) pretend being dying and (M²) not pretend being dying. "The birds of prey", governed by avarice, may either (F¹) inherit the fortune (or at least hope for the legacy) when (M¹) *Volpone* is dead (or is dying) or (F²) not inherit anything if (M²) *Volpone* is not dead.

Structure A (the clients)

(F ¹) inherit the fortune	(M ¹) <i>Volpone</i> is dead (dying)
(F ²) not inherit the fortune	(M ²) <i>Volpone</i> is not dead (dying)

Structure B (*Volpone*)

(F ¹) get amusement	(M ¹) pretend being dying
(F ²) not get amusement	(M ²) not pretend being dying

Structure *B* is inevitably the plot structure, but structure *A* can hardly be called the real structure. In the case of *Epicoene* the relation between functions and manifesting units is true and natural while that of *Volpone's* structure *A* is only tentative. Dauphine is Morose's heir by law; *Volpone* can die without appointing any heir at all, so we can only speak about the clients' interpretation of the structure, a misconception — a pseudostructure. Due to *Volpone's* and his clients' different motivations and expectations no identity between manifesting units, such as that existing in *Epicoene*, can be drawn. Moreover, there are no links between the two structures of *Volpone* at all; they differ both in manifesting units and in functions.

Volpone is put in a privileged position because he is the only *dramatis persona* who is aware of the existence of both structures. This knowledge which enables him to handle the action marks the comical value of the play.

The audience shares *Volpone's* secret and is expected to share his amusement too. *Epicoene* has been criticised for having a surprise ending and having the secret kept from the audience, who otherwise might have enjoyed the play much more.⁸ If the secret were revealed as early as the first act, or even exposition like in *Volpone*, the movement of the play would be changed and the interest rather diminished than increased. Instead, we are acquainted with half of the secret (in Act II Dauphine explains that *Epicoene* being a friend of his, according to mutually profitable agreement consented to, pretends to be a silent woman to be married to a fortune) and are led absorbed from act to act eager for the curtain to rise again. Each act, while clear and interesting itself, leads to its immediate successor and above all to the finale. For better illustration lines symbolizing acts may be used.

- I. exposition
- II. half of the secret revealed, the plot carried on
- III. betrothal, *Epicoene* speaks out
- IV. Morose decides to get divorced
- V. secret revealed
resolution

It can be easily observed that the pattern exposition — complication — resolution is neat and clear; the acts vary in length and this relation is preserved in the proportion in the length of the lines above. Moreover, the complication part of the play has its own inner frame. Act III is carefully tied with the preceding act and the following one. Morose's marriage complies with the tendencies of the second act and the fact that *Epicoene* speaks out brings about the resolution of getting divorced which is formulated and at-

⁸ Cf. Herford and Simpson, vol. 2, p. 80.

tempted in Act IV. We are presented with two decisive events of climactic force. The ascending tension achieves sudden release at the point of the full uncovering of the secret. Much of laughter is due to this surprise which at the expense of being postponed gains more vitality and effect. It is manifested in full and even such a foreshadowing as Truewit's remark about Epicoene's "masculine and loud commanding" cannot blur the effect. Being an integral part of suspense it is the point of greatest intensity reached in the play and immediately released. This theatrical ending, although it may appear farcical, is the anticlimax of the comedy, the audience's emotion is resolved into laughter.

The emotional response that a play creates in an audience may be of twofold kind. This response may be either to the emotions of the characters in the play or to the emotions of the author as he perceives these figures. Satirical comedy, such as Jonson's *Comedy*, creates in the audience a tendency to share the author's feelings: moral anger, contempt or scorn evoked by the *dramatis personae*. The emotion that we share with Jonson in *Epicoene* is amusement. What is more, and unusual with Jonson, he wants us to feel some sympathy for the characters that he creates. Even the "blacker" characters are not looked upon with disdain. They are ignored, as Morose who finally is commanded to retire to his room and be as private as he wishes, or simply accepted with their vices and follies like Daw and La-Foole. Nobody is condemned or severely punished. The foolish and ignorant people are just the link between *Epicoene's* world of feast and celebration and the degenerated and corrupted world of most of Jonson's comedies. The world of *Epicoene*, although as static as in other plays, is more bright and cheerful. Some persons are ridiculed only to be enjoyed and laughed at. However, the mood of *Epicoene* does not mark the change of Jonson's attitude towards mankind. Similar to his characters, he remains unchanged in his outlook and his later comedies such as *The Alchemist* or *Bartholomew Fair* may confirm this.

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