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## The Dramatist and His Age: Ben Jonson and His Comedies

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### **Abstract:**

*The relevance of drama and the dramatist to society is an ever-recurring issue. The dramatist's assignment of rebuking his society be it liberal or revolutionary society, is to reform it and make it literally whole again. This is an enduring social function. The societal function of the dramatist is dictated by the social world, just as his consciousness is also moulded by it. His obligation is to awaken men to the ethical and humanistic values of life with the intention of reforming or revolutionizing it. Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine the picture of some outstanding phases of the contemporary life of Ben Jonson and to estimate their values as a contribution to the knowledge and understanding of his time; such subjects like the influence of the Court and the inter-relationship of classes, the problem of dramatic arts and the taste of theatre-goers, the methods and aims of contemporary scholarship, the character and significance of everyday life. The work looks at the colour and atmosphere of London at one of its fascinating moments and Jonson's contributions towards sanitizing the decadent society through his comedies.*

**Keywords:** Comedy, Decadence, Dramatist, Jonson and London.

### **1. Introduction**

Jonson's life and works are inspirational enough for anyone who has read about him to write in praise and appreciation of an amiable man with an indomitable character and an insatiable quest for knowledge. Born of comparatively poor parentage, he did not relent but forged ahead to make a name for himself. He passed through rigorous hurdles of life and suffered humiliations, imprisonment and hardship, yet success was his watchword. His life spanned three English sovereigns and he found favour with all of them through his pen. Even when he was imprisoned, he came out more determined to work towards success and never used his pen to antagonize his leaders. In all his attacks on social ills, he was never specific on any individual but rather attacked the general public comically, humorously and satirically to the extent that no individual bore him a personal grudge.

As a vehicle, he chose that kind of comedy which, with the license that has belonged to comedy, from the beginning, exaggerated the follies he meant to correct. He chose a kind of mirror which slightly distorted the objects it showed, by heightening their deformity and making more obvious to the spectator their normal proportions. The resulting picture of the contemporary life of London, in his plays, cannot be taken at its face-value. It is like the perspective of a pictorial art which at that time was very popular. If one looked at it as a usual picture, it seemed distorted almost beyond meaning. But the artist provides a small hole and by looking through it from a precise angle, one saw the picture restored to its normal proportion.

Before determining the perspective from which to view Jonson's comedies, one needs an understanding of his personality. His personality combined a stern morality, a reliance upon reason rather than emotion, with a capacity for fighting, roistering and sharing the gay frivolities of the nobles. This is a rare combination. By a certain power of detachment in his nature, he was able at the moments of most whole-hearted absorption in life, to hold himself a bit outside of his experience, to take up a position slightly apart, and from there to observe. This is the inevitable position of a comic writer. Thus, in the midst of living, Jonson's comic sense was apart overhead, looking down upon life and preparing to show it to the world, delicately distorted in the oblique light of his personal and artistic creed.

It is an interesting fact to note that no writer of comedies in his days, seemed able to produce pure comedy which reflected the social life of the time, laughed at it and stopped there. That vigorous intellectual grasp which enables a man to hold the pageant of life steadily before him and see in clear, hard outlines, its humours, distortions, and comical abnormalities, is a capacity of the greatest ages and the most discriminating minds. Jonson has this ability so perfectly that perhaps, the very perfection has made him unattractive to people of less-blended intellect and emotion and jealousy to rival writers. Yet, Jonson was not writing to injure the feelings of anybody nor to favour individuals but to point out in a comical and satirical way, what he felt was going wrong in his society.

The Jacobean Shakespeare is by common knowledge, the greatest playwright the world has ever produced, and the Jacobean Jonson is certainly one of the world's greatest comic writers and this makes his era the most spectacular one as far as literature and drama are concerned. In effect, Jonson must have been influenced greatly by Shakespeare, who in turn, had most of his materials from classical playwrights like, Plautius, Terence and Marlowe. Like Shakespeare, Jonson must have drawn some of his plots from *Commedia Del Arte* that first came to England in 1546 and played before Queen Elizabeth in 1662. Both Shakespeare and Jonson made use of clowns and Jonson wrote the *Masques*. Hence, it may be quite valid to say that Jonson's use of masks, characters and types were of *Commedia Del Arte*'s influence. He might be called a grandson of the classical comedians, though whatever he might have copied from any source was done with modifications and sense of originality to make it perfectly distinct. Hence, he carved from comedy and retained to his name that peculiar and particular form of comedy called 'Comedy of humours and characters'.

Jonson's comedy of humours is a kind of simplified comedy of character, taking one point as characteristic to each ; e.g. a jealous husband, all ill-tempered man, a lazy man etc, but with little complexity. Even though there are traces of such comedies in the contemporary works of his age, none was so clear and so well-defined as to wield the comic, the artistic, the humorous and even the serious issues together in one given play. This is why he is called 'an artist with a difference,' in that while the other comedians like Heywood, Beaumont, Chapman, Fletcher and Dekker, in trying to write a comedy of character, came with only the principal character being comic, in all Jonson's comedies, all the character may be comic.

However, he did not achieve this as a magic, but through a series of experimental works of trial and error. He was a scientist of an artist, for he continued experimenting and improving on his previous works until he got whatever he wanted, yet he never rested but continued to perfect it. There were flaws in his early comedies like *The case is Altered* (1598), *Everyman in his Humour* (1599), *Everyone out of his Humour* (1600) and *Cynthia's Revels* (1600), until he came to a mature stage in his middle comedies especially in his *Volpone*, which he wrote in 1606, where all his characters were distinct but each representing a particular aspect of the vice which he wanted to attack.

Jonson's objects of comic satire were Avarice, Lust, Drunkenness, Witchcraft, and the Puritans or Hypocrisy and throughout his works, these vices reflected and continued to echo and re-echo. He knew that these were social ills but unlike his predecessors and contemporaries, he did not attack them through the same angle they did. He simply exaggerated these societal ills and made them objects of ridicule and laughter even though he knew that they were serious issues that could have been viewed with a tragic look. He did not also look at such vices as non-existent in other societies but meant to minimize their existence. He knew that drinking could not be banished but used himself as an example of a drinker who could only blame excessive drunkards. In all, Jonson's comedies are timeless, affecting the Jacobean England of the 17<sup>th</sup> century in the same way as they could affect any society in any part of the world at any time in history.

## 2. His Brief Biography

Ben Jonson was born on June 11, 1573 in London. In 1588, he left Westminster school and was an apprentice as a bricklayer. Between 1591 and 1592, he was a soldier in the low countries. He married Ann Lewis in November 14, 1594. By 1597, he had become a playwright and an actor. He was imprisoned for acting in and for part authorship of a lost play titled, *The Isle of Dogs*. In 1598, he wrote *The case is Altered*, which was acted by a company of boys recruited from the choir school of the Chapel Royal. He also wrote *Everyman in his Humour*, which was acted by the Lord Chamberlain's men, the company of actors for whom Shakespeare also wrote.

In the same year, 1598, he killed Gabriel Spencer, a fellow actor in a duel. He was imprisoned and was freed by the plea of the benefit by the clergy. Because of this, he became converted in jail to Roman Catholicism. Between 1599 and 1600, he wrote *Everyman out of his Humour*, which was also acted by the Lord Chamberlain's men at the New Globe Theatre. In 1600, he wrote *Cynthia's Revels*, acted by the Boys of the Chapel Royal. In 1601, he wrote *Poetaster*, which marked the end of his early comedies. This play was also acted by the Boys of the Chapel Royal.

In 1603, he wrote *Sejanus*, which was acted by the Lord Chamberlain's men, now known as the King's Men. In the same year, he wrote the first *Masque*, *Entertainment at Althorpe*. This year 1603, also was the date of his son Benjamin's death at the age of six. Between 1604 and 1605, Ben Jonson wrote *Eastward Ho!*, in collaboration with Chapman and Marston. This play was acted by the Boys of the Chapel Royal, now known as Children of the Queen's Revels. The three authors were imprisoned because of a slight in it against King James.

In 1606, Jonson wrote *Volpone*, which was acted at both Oxford and Cambridge Universities and by the King's Men at the Globe Theatre. In 1609, he wrote *Epicuene*, acted by the children of the Queen's Revels. In 1610, he wrote *The Alchemist*, acted by the King's Men. In the same year 1610, Jonson returned to Anglican denomination. In 1611, he wrote *Catline*, acted by the King's Men. Between 1612 and 1613, he travelled to France as a tutor to the son of Sir Walter Raleigh. In 1616, he wrote *Bartholomew's Fair*, acted by Lady Elizabeth's Men. In 1618, he wrote *The Devil is an Ass* acted by the King's Men. In the same year, he published his works in *Folio* and received a Royal Pension. Between 1618-1619, he made a journey on foot to Scotland and visited Williams Drummond there.

On July 17, 1619, he received an honorary M. A. Degree from Oxford University. In 1623, he was a teacher at Gresham College in London. In 1629, Jonson wrote *The New Inn*, acted by the Kings Men; which proved to be a complete failure. In 1623, he wrote *The Magnetic Lady*, acted by the King's Men. In 1633, he wrote *A Tale of a Tub*, which was revised from an earlier play and acted by Queen Henrietta's Men. In 1634, he wrote the final *Masque*, *Love's Welcome at Bolsover*. In 1635, he lost a second son also named Benjamin.

On August 6, 1637, he died in Westminster, and was buried in Westminster Abbey on August 9, the same year. Between 1640 and 1641, his works were published in two volumes of Folio by Sir Kenelm Digby.

### 3. The Nature of Jonson's Comedies

In Jonson and in many of the Restoration dramatists, the comedy of manners, satirizing current foibles, is often combined with the comedy of intrigues, but one fascinating characteristic of Ben Jonson is that he kept steadily to his own side of the game by maintaining his constant stand on comedy of Humour or characters, in almost all his works.

'Comedy' according to the Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English (2009:1220), "is a branch of drama that deals with everyday life and humorous events". Bamidele (2001:14) on the other hand, sees comedy as "a genre of literature that is primarily composed to amuse". It is aimed at evoking laughter from the audience to create pleasure and diffuse tension. Comedy is always expected to end happily and it makes use of humour, wit and clowning to achieve the desired effect. Comic satires exaggerate faults with dramatic wits to correct manners, morals and ideas.

According to Marjorie Bolton (1959), the essential function of tragedy is to make people think and feel more deeply, while the essential function of comedy is to amuse. The amusement may range from a quiet smile to a guffaw. Comedy can be very sophisticated or very simple, it can also be warm-hearted and humane like Eden Philpott's *Yellow Sand* and the *Farmer's Wife* or brilliant but heartless, like *The Provoked Wife* or *The way of the world*.

Comedy is divided into types such as comedy of errors, comedy of manners, sentimental comedy, comedy of character or humours and farce, which is to comedy what melodrama is to tragedy. Farce is aimed at producing laughter by exaggerated effects of various kinds and is without psychological depth.

Among these types of comedies, Ben Jonson is noted for his constant indulgence in the comedy of character or humours. Here, the chief comic interest is in the characters themselves-which is deeper and more difficult to convey than mere mannerism and foibles. Most of Shakespeare's comedies are more or less comedies of characters, though some tend towards comedies of manners and other end up in comedies of intrigues. Most of them too are comedies of errors. Jonson specialized in comedy of humours which is a simplified comedy of character, taking one point as characteristic to each person, so that we can have a jealous man, an ill-tempered man, a generous man, a lazy man and so on, but with little complexity.

Whereas in tragedy, we see people suffering because of their characters, in comedy, we see them make fools of themselves because of their reactions to the comic situations. The treatment of character in comedy may range from the cynical and almost contemptuous, as in Jonson's *The Silent Woman* or Somerset Maugham's *The Breadwinner*, to the kindly and affectionate treatment of man's fallibility as in Shakespeare's *As You Like it*, or Noel Coward's *The Young Idea* and Christopher Fry's *Venus Observed*.

Sometimes in comedy of character, only the principal character is really comic. For instance, in Moliere's *L'Avare*, only the Miser, Harpagon is really comic, whereas, in all Jonson's comedies, all the characters may be comic. A good comedy of errors such as Goldsmith's *She Stoops to conquer*, also has a strong character-interest. There is, however, a bit of comedy of manners in Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew's Fair*.

### 4. Subjects of Jonson's Comedies

Almost all through Jonson's comedies, he seems to be hammering on and attacking five main vices. These are: Avarice, Lust, Drunkenness, Witchcraft and The Puritans. Even throughout Jacobean comedy, avarice and lust received a greater deal of attention. Avarice in Jonson's drama is particularly important for it, not only occurs with greater frequency than other vices, but is treated as a major theme in several of his comedies. Lust is the favourite topic of hell-fire-and-brimstone preachers, a sin sufficiently prevalent in any age to engage the attention of moralists. Both avarice and lust develop from emotions which underlie so much of human conduct that they are necessary in judging any dramatist's use of them to be on guard to determine whether he is using them as materials necessary for plot and character, or whether he is using them for satiric and didactic purposes (Baum, 1999).

In addition to these two major vices, drunkenness has also been selected, since the dramatic and didactic materials in the various portrayals of the vices are relatively simple. This vice was too prevalent in Jonson's London of which in 1606, the parliament passed an Act for repressing the odious and loathsome sin of drunkenness. According to London law at that time, the habit of drunkenness had grown into common use and had become the root and foundation of many other sins such as bloodshed, murder, fornication, swearing etc. to the great dishonor of God and the nation (Knights, 1987).

The last two categories to be looked at, are Witchcraft and Puritanism. The plays of Jacobean dramatists deal abundantly with these two topics. The evils attendant upon the belief in witches deserved the attention of a social reformer as Reginald Scot pointed out in an epistle prefixed to the *Discoveries of Witchcraft* (Baum (1991).

Puritanism was a vital movement in English social order in Jonson's time which was growing stronger during the reign of James. The factor involved in the downfall of Stuart line were already showing themselves in the clash between a gay court society and the more serious middle and lower class elements of the population of London. The theatre was a powerful force for conveying ideas and a dramatist who was fundamentally a sociologist or a statesman might have exerted a tremendous force in wielding these groups together. But Jonson was a comic dramatist, not a statesman, or a reformer. His treatment of the vices enumerated above is broad and theatrical, rather than detailed and sociological. Moreover, satiric dramatist is, always limited by his medium. Satiric comedy permits the dramatist to depict vice and folly, to laugh at and scorn them, but only within strict limitations does it permit him to suggest remedies for these evils.

Avarice, which fosters on ill-distribution of wealth, is probably the most virulent of all social and moral vices. In Tudor's England, avarice involved such problems as the exorbitant rate of interest and the chicanery practiced by the money lenders, the patents of monopoly granted by the sovereigns, and the economic conditions which forced large groups of the population of England into beggary. Avarice was the motive behind fraudulent speculations and elaborate hoaxes by means of which the gullible are cheated (Knights, 1987).

Jonson's plays depict the ugliness of greed. He chose avarice for use in his plots and characters because it is such a protean vice, so highly flexible and theatrical and also because it was so prevalent in the life which he knew. Satiric comedy needs fools, great and small, and Jonson was well aware of the ease with which greed makes fools of men.

His first treatment of avarice in his plays was in *The Case is Altered*, in which Jacques thinks constantly of his gold, moves his money from one place to another, suspects his daughter and her suitors of stealing his gold, and through his own behaviour, betrays his original theft of the money. In association with other characters, Jacques is entirely comic. Alone, he is at times comic and at times, tinged with the dark grandeur which Jonson later discovered to be because of his reliance upon a conventional plot which makes it impossible for him to show a very clear or vigorous picture of vice.

So Jonson had to improve in his subsequent comedies to depict avarice. He portrayed Sordido, the hoarder of grain, in *Everyman out of his Humour*, as a clear attempt at the depiction of avarice but found out also it was conventional. In it, Sordido gloats over the bad weather which will make the crops fail and refuses to send his grain to market even when ordered to do so. His denunciation of the poor is a master piece of cold barbarity. The play also shows signs of amateurism in Jonson but he was proving himself right when he wrote *Volpone*. Here, his technique became mature. He uses avarice as the main theme. The satire, the characterization and the motivation of the plot are all derived from the same source. He is able to depict monsters of greed in six different human shapes and places them in a plot which is tightly woven and credible. His satiric emphasis on avarice never falters.

When next he chooses avarice as his theme, he not only combines the vice with other follies, and social ills, but relates it to particular forms of chicanery prevalent in his time. This is seen in *The Alchemist*, in which the central scene is in the laboratory of a pseudo-scientist Lovewit. Jonson's satire covers everything, coarsens Face, Subtle and Dol, and makes the dupes more ridiculous.

All the characters are portrayed in a realistic, satiric fashion. The robust comedy and the satiric rogues are so tightly interlaced that laughter cannot be separated from the satire nor can the avaricious and the fraudulent aspect of the fools and rogues be torn away from their actions and characters.

The rogues in *Bartholomew's Fair*, like those in *The Alchemist* are motivated by greed and receive from Jonson an equally realistic and comic treatment. Here, cheating is their utmost concern. The motivation of Jonson's *The Devil is an Ass* is derived from avarice. In this too, avarice manifests itself in association with one of the economic evils of London, rather than in a conventional usurer or miser. The avaricious projector Meercraft, is a Swindler who through his promises of patents and monopolies, lures a series of greedy fools into his net. Meercraft plays up to this theme of avarice in all his speeches to Fitzdottrel who is gullible because as Jonson points out, when he is promised gold, he becomes more prodigal.

Avarice is also the motivating force in Jonson's last comedy, *The Magnetic Lady*. Most of his characters are greedy and are satirized through the ridiculous follies attendant upon that vice. *Sir Moth Interest* (the Usurer), *Mistress Polish*, *Mr. Bias*, *Mrs. Keep* (the Nurse), *Mother Claire* (the Midwife), *Parson Palate*, *Doctor Rut*, *Tim Item* (the Apothecary), *Sir Diaphanous*, *Silk Worn* (the Courtier) and *Practice* (the Lawyer) are all avaricious and their behaviour is chiefly regulated by this trait.

The creation of characters in *Volpone* is one of Jonson's major achievements. In it are combined the gloating greed of Uncle Penniboy, the lack of humanity of Sordido, and the lust of Sir Epicure Mammon, all intensified and strengthened. These traits emerge not by confession but by force of events. Dramatic technique therefore combines in one man so many evil forces in all their power and to cover them with broad farce and laughter. In only one character, that is Sordido, does the didactic element dominate all other factors. The humanity of Uncle Penniboy combines with his avarice to make him a delightful comic character.

Similarly, the avaricious character in *The Alchemist* either conceals the vice under other vices, or make it so manifest that it is converted into comic extravaganza. Even *Volpone*, which is Jonson's most masterly handling of the sin, mitigates the severity of the criticism by comedy and sheer farce. Yet however, it may be hidden, or presented in light vein, or enlivened by frivolity, the didactic element is still present in these characters and plays. Jonson uses avarice as a substantial issue which can be cast into a wide variety of comic moulds.

#### 4.1. Lust

Lust is a vice suitable for both tragedy and comedy. When the vice is allowed full tragic scope, it may result in Victorian Corombona. When it is treated as comedy, it results in a Fabliau. The tragic conception of lust is usually a moral one while the comic is usually amoral and concerned with manners, rather than ethics. Jonson treats lust as a breach of the moral code in only two comedies- *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*.

In *Volpone*, Jonson treats lust not as a social folly as in *Cynthia's Revels*, *Everyman out of his Humour* and *Epicoene*, nor as an historical love affair, as in *The Poetaster*, but as a breach of moral code. The Passion of *Volpone* for Celia, the wife of Corvino, is an important part of all his glittering evil. As soon as Mosca describes Celia to *Volpone*, the magnifico begins to scheme at once; he must see her "through at her window". Mosca's scheme to trick Corvino into bringing Celia to *Volpone's* chamber is so successful that Corvino arrives before the appointed time; he feared Mosca "might forget it and they prevent us". (1:3:7). In the scene that follows, Celia is left alone in the inner room with *Volpone*. The song in which *Volpone* addresses Celia is the beautiful lyric adapted from Catallus V:

Come, my Celia, let us prove while we can, the sports of love... Suns that set, may rise again ...But if once, we lose this light 'Tis with us perpetual night (1:4:10).

He describes the food, the perfume, the clothes, he will purchase for her and the splendor of the passion he has to offer. Celia's replies, however, grow firmer and longer as Volpone's speeches, in power. When at last, he resorts to force, Bonaria rescues her.

In the portrayal of lust as a moral evil in the play, Jonson, using a device of a tragic poet, removes it from the realm of the common place and clothes it with imagery. But the power of the presentation does not come from a flat condemnation of lust as a disgusting evil, rather, it is derived from the dramatic sense which led Jonson to portray as many sides of the picture as possible in juxtaposition; one to another. Corvino's insatiable greed, which drives him relentlessly to urge the prostitution of his wife is appalling. Volpone's sensuality is terrifying, but because the strength of his sudden passion for Celia borders upon the heroic, he appears in a more favourable light.

The dramatist shows to his audience, a picture of sin at its blackest, yet challenges them to decide which sin is the more grievous; the prostitution urged on by the avarice of the husband, or the lust which arises spontaneously from the emotion of Volpone himself. The scene is food for thought.

Unlike Volpone whose lechery first appears with terrifying concentration in his sudden passion for Celia, Sir Epicure Mammon in *The Alchemist*, displays an absurdly lustful disposition from the time he comes on the stage. Sir Epicure's first speech explains to Surly the advantages of wealth to attract all sorts of women. Again, after Face had assured him that the philosopher's stone is almost completed, the first thing he plans to buy is sexual gratification.

I do mean to have a list of wives ad concubines, equal with Salomon; who had the stone alike, with me... (2:5:7)

He meditates upon what sort of bath he and his mistresses will take, how much money he will pay a merchant for his pretty wife and who will make the best bawd.

In *The Alchemist*, unlike Volpone, Jonson treats lust in a remarkable light manner. This he did partly by increasing the tempo of the play, so that the spectator, amused by the critics of the rascals and their gulls, has no opportunity to meditate upon the evil of lust. There is greater change in the characters themselves. The lechery of Epicure is reduced to absurdity. He is vice-ridden, yet the emotion he rouses is merely a contemptuous amusement. Lust was overblown and rotten as in ordinary animal manifestations in *Dol*, *Face* and *Subtle*. Lust was not a desirable characteristics and although Jonson's personal standards were not very rigid, he never held lust up as attractive.

#### 4.2. Drunkenness

Jonson's attitude towards drinking is usually tolerant, he was too convivial himself to deal in a militant way with the vice. In his comedies, he preached no sermon such as those delivered by Shakespeare, Chapman, Dekker and Marston. Thus, Jonson's use of drunkenness, like that of lust appears to correspond with his personal attitude. Drunkenness to him was a vice only in so far as it made a man a fool, and as it was an index of wastefulness. The reflection on drinking which is found in his work is a note in the *Discoveries* where he comments on a shameless husband who has:

a delicate wife, a fair fortune and family, to go and welcome, yet he had rather be drunk with mine host, and the fiddlers of such a Town, then go home (1;2:7-8).

When Jonson directs shafts of ridicule against his own drinking habits, as he does in both *The Staple of News* and *Everyman* out of his *Humour*, he appears to have no other object than ridiculing and laughing at his own expense.

#### 4.3. Witchcraft

The attitude of the people of England towards witchcraft in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century was far from being healthy. The English public in general believed in the actuality of witchcraft; that there were witches; that witches made contracts with the devils. That supernatural deeds were performed by the devil who disguised in the shape of a familiar spirit, that the witch took part in these deeds by virtue of her covenant with the devil. Witches' trials in English courts were therefore, worthy of satire. In some of the trials, torture was used to secure confession and even the testimony of children was accepted. There seems to have been little attempt to impeach the witnesses or to discriminate between the words of reputable, intelligent person and the words of a prejudiced or ignorant one.

Jonson was evidently dubious of the witchcraft of his day, as he was of the alchemical and astrological lore. He did not however, attack the basic fact of the existence of witches nor did he show he had no faith in the validity of witchcraft. His satire was on the fraudulent demoniac possession and faked necromancy. In Jonson's dramas, he uses witchcraft for a variety of purposes. In *The Masque of Queens* and *The Sad Shepherd*, witches appear as characters but they are allegorical figures and their didactic value has nothing to do with uprooting the belief in witchcraft or reforming the evils connected with it.

Another phase of witchcraft which Jonson as well as other Jacobean dramatists, utilized was the devil's lore from the old cyclic and morality plays. The devil with his vice was outmoded on the stage, but he was comic and familiar and therefore a good subject for laughter. In *The Devil is as Ass*, Jonson adapts the devil's lore for comic and satiric purposes, but the satire does not fall on witchcraft or necromancy. In the first two scenes, there are satiric references to conjurers and magicians, but the body of the satire in the comedy is the wickedness of London and the inability of infernal spirits to compete in vileness with man.

From this brief summary of Jonson's material on witchcraft, it is evident that he uses witches to heighten the pictorial effect of masque and pastoral and embodies his allegory in them. He uses devil's lore to strengthen his satire on the viciousness of London life and to help him achieve comic and theatrical effects. His satire on fake demoniac possession and necromancy lends itself to reformatory

purposes, since it tends to weaken the audience belief in supernatural occurrence and brings about a realization that every knave should not be credited with supernatural powers.

#### 4.4. *The Puritans*

The general pattern for the satiric portrait of the Puritans was formed before Jonson turned his attention to the sect. Marlowe and Nashe had written of the hypocrites whose sanctimonious air covered almost every scene in the dialogue as early as late 1580s. Also, the dramatists, satirists and character-writers who followed, continued to attack the Puritans primarily because of their hypocrisy. Such diverse writers as John Donne, Sir Thomas Overbury, Thomas Timme, Samuel Rowlands and King James made attacks on the hypocritical Puritans.

The dramatists found the Puritans very useful. These fashionable looking, sober individuals offered a defined group which the audience enjoyed seeing satirized. To the dramatist, the Puritans personified the attack on the theatres, and by way of retaliation, they made a fool of them on every stage. The Puritans as a dramatic type might have any number of vices, such as avarice, lust, gluttony and drunkenness but their baseness was always covered with hypocritical piety-which enabled them to overlook their own vices and make zealous attacks on such petty follies as the use of tobacco or starch. They were as Knights (1987:28) puts it “a curious corrector of things indifferent”.

Jonson emphasizes hypocrisy in his dramatic criticism of the Puritans. He uses this vice to develop his characters and his plots and from the vice too, he builds his satire and comedy. He uses the sub-vices of gluttony and avarice to make his characters more disgusting. Jonson thought the Puritans a menace to the state and the church but his treatment of them is comic and satiric, rather than doctrinaire. Parody, repetition, comic contrast and incongruity are used to serve the purpose of satire and laughter. Jonson’s attack on the Puritans is more shown in the plays: *The Alchemist* and *Bartholomew, s Fair*. In *The Alchemist*, Ananias and Tribulation form an integral part of the plot. Beside Sir Epicure Mammon, Dapper and Druggier, the Puritans take their place as greedy, comic dupes. Ananias and Tribulation, however, are more meanly avaricious than the other gulls and they have an astonishing ability to quibble over small matters where carefully persuading themselves that a greater sin is justified. Their desire to secure money by fraudulent means is accompanied by prudish remark concerning the evil attendant upon gaiety, ceremony and vanity.

The Puritans’ portraits in *The Alchemist* are sharp but in *Bartholomew, s Fair*, similar characterizations are made more vivid through careful attention to individual frailties. Jonson’s satire on the Puritans, like the satire on avarice indicates that he considers his satiric material of sufficient importance to build his play out of that material rather than to fit his material into a conventional plot with necessary imperfections and contradictions. He develops his subject-matter through plots and characters of his own construction in order to be allowed an unstained hand. His problem was to ridicule and satirize these hypocritical upstarts and he solved it more successfully than any of his contemporaries.

This success most likely reflects the audience’ interest in its immediate social relevance especially as the play *The Alchemist* heavily satirizes its Puritan characters. These Puritan characters’ Ananias and Tribulation wish to raise money for their church, yet *Subtle* and *Face*, suggest that the only possibility for making more money will be if they use the philosopher’s stone to create gold. Thus, though Ananias refers to himself or “a faithful brother”. (2:5:7), he considers counterfeiting money and, in turn, defying the law. He is willing to be immoral in order to benefit his life of supposed morality. These two characters’ hypocrisy highlights the central objection of Jonson and his contemporaries, as Puritans’ objection to their plays were based around the idea that the plays were immoral, yet they could be immoral as long as they benefited God.

This dislike of hypocrisy and degrading representation of the Puritans, becomes an even stronger theme in *Bartholomew, s Fair*. This play displays the interconnectedness between human indulgence and exploitation and is a play of craft and cunning. The people who come to the fair and those who work at the fair are alike in their infectious desire and avarice.

*The Alchemist* was written in 1610, at the height of Puritanism in London. Because of Jonson’s dislike for the Puritans’ harsh judgment, he began to create characters who are sympathetic, despite their vices. Jonson’s increased disgust with puritanism and its reflection through the literature of the time, presents such an interesting cultural revolution, since the increased public displays of intolerance, like with literature and performances, led to the puritans’ colonization of America.

Thus, Jonson attacks more social vices than any of his contemporaries in the Jacobean era. Quackery connected with alchemy and astrology, false demoniac possession, the scandalous falsehood of the stories published as news, the danger of the projects of monopoly are all found more vigorously and thoroughly satirized in his plays than any other Jacobean dramatist. His satire on social problems is not the conventional matter of Jacobean dramatic plots. Jonson alone, as it is evident from the study of the satiric and didactic content of his comedies and those of Heywood, Dekker, Middleton and Chapman, struggled to build his plots, characters and comedy out of the very material which he wanted to attack or reform.

#### 5. Conclusion

It is an interesting fact that no writer of comedies in Jonson’s days seemed able to produce pure comedy which reflects the social ills of the time, laughs at it and stops there. This vigorous intellectual grasp which enables a man to hold the pageant of life steadily before him and sees in a clear, hard outline its humours and distortions, its comical abnormalities is a capacity of the greatest ages and of the most discriminating that perhaps, the very perfection has made him unattractive to the minds of people of less blended intellect and emotions.

A consideration of the way in which contemporary writers of comedy make their pictures of life, helps to differentiate and give one a sense of Jonson’s peculiar outlook and method. Heywood, Beaumont, Fletcher and Massinger were among Jonson’s contemporary

comedians but each had his own work slightly different from Jonson's. They might have the same theme and their layout or outlines might tend towards the same goal but by the time they would have gone half way, they would have diverted to either romanticism or comedy of intrigue or melodrama. In short, the comedies outside those of Jonson which attempted to reproduce the life of the time, gave a much less steady and impartial view of it. Their picture likely to be self-conscious or restricted or most frequently of all, was coloured by romance.

Jonson was both a poet and a comic artist and his comedy becomes a perfect communication between him and his audience. He taught them right values by appealing to their intelligence. He never forgot his purpose but succeeded in it marvelously that his mark has remained in the world Literatures. His comedies are timeless, affecting the Jacobean London of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century in the same way as they would affect any society in any part of the world. As the vices which he was writing about constituted a social menace to the England of 17<sup>th</sup> Century, so do they affect us here in Africa and in Nigeria in particular today.

As Jonson took up his pen to attack those evils in those days, so can any contemporary Nigerian, French or German write take up his pen to attack such or any similar social ills in his country. We have such bold Ben Jonson's like Wole Soyinka, J. P. Clark, Femi Osofisan etc. In Nigeria but these playwrights like Jonson have at one time or the other found themselves behind the bars, hence some of them have decided to watch the ugly situation in silence.

Ben Jonson attacked only five main vices in his comedies which in fact embraced many other vices but were he to be in Nigeria today, he would have many more vices to attack. His attack was on the general public but were in today's Nigeria, he would have found corruption right from one-day old baby to the highest person in the country and could have invented another genre of literature, strong enough to make his impact felt by all and sundry. In all, one can conclude unequivocally that Jonson's life and works are exemplary and worthy of emulation of any society at any age.

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