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AN EXPRESSION OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS IN BEN JOHNSONS'S COMEDIES

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ABSTRACT

Drama has been perceived in multi-faceted ways. On a general note, it has been viewed as the reflection of life; the society, to be precise. Thus, any literary work is a by-product of the society where it is written. This study focuses on the play-text as a reflection of the social history of a particular society (London), at a particular period in time(1610), using Ben Jonson's work as our main paradigm.

KEYWORDS: *Society, Sociologist, Comedy, Playwright, Expansion, Protagonist*

INTRODUCTION

The self in Jonson's comedies, like the self described by modern sociologists, is a reflection of other reflections, created by the society it creates. As Milgram's experiment on obedience to authority seems to show, the social self is radically contingent. Therefore the anagnorisis in Jonson's comedies is a catastrophe in more than the technical sense; it is the discovery of a self that cannot bear its own exposure. By contrast, the heroes and heroines of Shakespeare's romantic comedies discover themselves in relation to a nurturing family and a mature sexual family. Theirs is a psychological self. In the "comical satires," Jonson encounters the problem of finding appropriate endings for plays whose characters can achieve no satisfying self-discovery. In Volpone the protagonist acts like an experimental social psychologist, exposing the pliability of the social self. The catastrophe shows that Volpone's own "substance" is only a reflection of his world's insubstantiality.

Jonson's life story reads like a tragic novel. Born in London the posthumous son of a clergyman and trained by his stepfather as a bricklayer, Jonson became a mercenary, then an actor and leading playwright. At the height of his career, he was unchallenged in his chosen profession and a companion to some of the leading figures of his day. But he died virtually alone and impoverished eight years after suffering a debilitating stroke. He was buried beneath Westminster Abbey under the inscription "O Rare Ben Johnson". His life spanned the years 1573 to 1637, a period of extraordinary change in English society: from the latter years of the reign of Queen Elizabeth I through to the eve of the English Civil War in 1642. Passionate and volatile, he was a man with a clear eye for the world around him. His plays are noted for their satirical view of the modern--capitalist--class relations that were beginning to develop.

Bourgeois monetary relations were breaking down the old feudal ties that had existed in England and which had been grounded in a largely subsistence agricultural economy. London was experiencing an explosive expansion--a process driven by the impact of trade and the early

market economy. A century before Volpone was written, the city's population numbered just 60,000. By the time of the play's first performance in 1606, it had more than trebled to over 200,000. London was soon to become Europe's largest city.The growth continued despite bouts of the plague and other epidemics. In the years 1603 and 1625, for example, between one fifth and one quarter of the residents died from disease. One of Jonson's later major works, The Alchemist, is set in London during an outbreak of the plague and concerns a wealthy home owner who has fled the capital, leaving the servants in charge of his city mansion.The expansion of trade along the Thames, and the broadening power of the royal court led to a London property boom. England's foreign trade, which extended from Russia to the Mediterranean and the New World, grew tenfold between 1610 and 1640.

Economic growth was also accompanied by deepening social inequality. The real wage of carpenters, for instance, halved from Elizabeth's reign to that of Charles I. Side by side with opulent wealth were squalid tenements. Yet the poor from elsewhere in the country and from continental Europe were drawn to London by the prospect of wages that were more than 50 percent higher than the rest of southern England. The city became a place of business and of fashion for the rural-based aristocracy, and Jonson parodies in some of his plays the tendency of young aristocrats to sell acres of their land to pay for city fineries. London was the heart of the royal court and the state bureaucracy. At any time over a thousand gentlemen connected with parliament or the law courts could be found residing at the city's inns. These inns became a hub of intellectual ferment where writers and actors like Jonson met with merchants, gentlemen and other leading figures of the day. Jonson dedicated his first major work, Every Man In His Humour, to these inns, calling them "the noblest nurseries of humanity and liberty in the kingdom".

London's economic expansion and the aggregation of so many and varied social elements stimulated the cultural development expressed in Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre. At the same time, the social tensions brewing within the growing metropolis created a receptive audience for the satire for which Jonson was to become famous.

Ben Jonson occupies by common consent the second place among English dramatists of the reigns of Elizabeth I and James I. He was a man of contraries. For "twelve years a papist," he was also—in fact though not in title—Protestant England's first poet laureate. His major comedies express a strong distaste for the world in which he lived and a delight in exposing its follies and vices. A gifted lyric poet, he wrote two of his most successful plays entirely in prose, an unusual mode of composition in his time. Though often an angry and stubborn man, no one had more disciples than he. He was easily the most learned dramatist of his time, and he was also a master of theatrical plot, language, and characterization. It is a measure of his reputation that his dramatic works were the first to be published in folio (the term, in effect, means the "collected works") and that his plays held their place on the stage until the period of the Restoration. Later they fell into neglect, though *The Alchemist* was revived during the 18th century, and in the mid-20th century several came back into favour: *Volpone, The Alchemist,* and *Bartholomew Fair* especially have been staged with striking success.

Jonson's chief plays are still very good theatre. His insistence on putting classical theory into practice in them has reinforced rather than weakened the effect of his gift of lively dialogue, robust characterization, and intricate, controlled plotting. In each of them he

maneuvers a large cast of vital personages, all consistently differentiated from one another. Jonson's plots are skillfully put together; incident develops out of incident in a consistent chain of cause and effect, taking into account the respective natures of the personages involved and proceeding confidently through a twisting, turning action that is full of surprises without relying on coincidence or chance. Sometimes Jonson's comedy derives from the dialogue, especially when it is based on his observation of contemporary tricks of speech. But there are also superbly ludicrous situations, often hardly removed from practical joke.

CONCLUSION

The picture of life, drama and society which Ben Jonson gives in his writings is full of the colour and atmosphere of London at one of its fascinating moments. The court had learnt how to be brilliant and lavish and often irresponsible. The literary world was open to a great variety of people; University wits and Courtiers shared its honours and failures with men of small education and training. Everyday life was full of theatrical contrasts; luxury and poverty ran parallel courses. In fact, the contrasts were becoming so marked that more and more people were questioning them. Society was growing self-conscious and turning its eyes upon its own code and manner of living. One group of people was protesting against the religious autocracy of the Bishops, another group of young satirists scourged the foibles of contemporary society in the manner of Juvenal and enjoyed both phases of the process. The great theatre-going public grew conscious of its influence and made its demands upon the playwright forcefully that the development of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama was largely a reflection of the changing preference of public taste. Thus, in all the departments of life, the reign of authority was weakening. The relationships of classes and groups to one another were examined; when they were faulty, they were challenged.

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