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# Introduction

# Some notes on Ben Johnson’s Works

Born in 1572, Jonson began his working life as a bricklayer and then a soldier, and it is perhaps experiences in these fields – and his prodigious intake of falling down water – that shaped his no-nonsense, confrontational personality.

Jonson became an actor after serving in the army in the Netherlands. By all accounts, he was not a very good actor, but during his time with Pembroke's Men he co-authored a play, "Isle of Dogs," with Nashe. The play, accused of spreading sedition, would lead to one of many brushes with the State, and he was imprisoned for some months.

Jonson wrote for the Admiral's Men until 1856, when a quarrel with Gabriel Spencer, one of the company's leading players, led to a duel. Spencer was killed and Jonson only spared execution by drawing on his knowledge of Latin to invoke the benefit of the clergy, which enabled the convicted criminal to pass as a clergyman, and therefore obtain a discharge from the civil courts. It is believed that while in Newgate Prison he converted to Roman Catholicism, and here was branded on his thumb with the "T" for Tyburn (the most famous place of execution in London after the Tower) to ever more remind him of his lucky escape.

Jonson's first box office successes came about with comedies like "Every Man In His Humour," which featured Shakespeare in the cast. It is thought Shakespeare was probably the one who first championed Jonson as a writer of note. Jonson's method of working began to crystallize about this time, and he began to produce more hard-edged, biting satire dispensing with a lot of the farce and frippery that were Shakespeare's tools. As his work became ever more distinctive and classically inspired he began to heap disdain on other writers and their work.

Boys' Company performance of "Poetaster"In the early 1600's, Jonson embraced a new phenomenon. Boys Companies were as seductive to audiences and as threatening to Shakespeare's brand of theatre as N\*Synch and Boys 2 Men were to today's Springsteens, REMs and Rolling Stones.

Boys Companies were highly trained in vocal and instrumental music, and with their youthful looks and skin were probably a lot easier to relate to in women's roles than the half shaved, former soldiers of the adult theatre companies.

Jonson, the classical scholar, and Shakespeare, the populist crowd-pleaser as Jonson saw him, even came to blows in a "discussion" over the merits, or otherwise, of the Boys Companies. A protracted, and wordy, War of the Poets ensued, with both sides of the argument trading digs and insults through their work.

Imagine an episode of the TV show Frasier that lasts three years, and features an unbroken argument between Niles and Frasier Crane on the relative merits of Jung and Freud, and you get the general idea.

Jonson would find himself in trouble with the State time and time again – for ridiculing the Scots in "Eastward Ho!" and most seriously when he was questioned over the gunpowder plot, after which he renounced his "provocative" Roman Catholicism. Later his play, "Sejanus," would also fall foul of the censors.

Jonson, always something of a misunderstood outsider in his own writing, would comment on his lot at the hands of a society rife with envy and suspicion:

Know, tis a dangerous age,

Wherein who writes had need present his scenes

Forty-fold proof against the conjuring means

Of base detractors and illiterate apes

(It's interesting that spooky rock person Marilyn Manson has been quoted as referring to Limp Bizkit's front man Fred Durst as an "illiterate ape," Manson being another artistic figure who felt his work was being misrepresented after the atrocious events at Columbine.)

With the arrival of James I on the throne, Jonson found himself in favor once again, and, with his co-writer Inigo Jones, created Court Masques for Queen Anne until their inevitable quarrel. Jonson and Shakespeare seem to have called a truce on their dispute and become close again around 1609. Until Shakespeare's death they seem to have continued their almost good natured jibes and sniping, with Jonson typically dismissing his friend as having "small Latin and less Greek."

Ben Jonson clearly saw himself as a champion of intellectualism – totalitarian states often don't care for intellectuals to the point that they will generally kill most of them. Shakespeare could ultimately be said to be cleverer in diluting his classical influences to reach a wider audience. It's that old Hollywood-versus-arthouse debate.

It was said at the time that "gentle Will" Shakespeare showed Jonson a courtesy that was not returned. Jonson certainly seems to have been brusque and volatile, a matter not helped by his drinking. Everyone drank alcohol in Elizabethan and Jacobean London because the quality of the available drinking water was so bad. But Jonson literally turned it into an art form, composing whole poems about his favorite drinking holes.

There seems to have been an almost brotherly relationship between Jonson and Shakespeare. Though their rivalry was strong, and their verbal jibes at each other cutting, both seemed to recognize the talent in each other – Jonson grudgingly, Shakespeare more generously. They seem to have spent a great deal of time in each other's company. It is believed that Shakespeare may have become ill prior to his death after a typically uproarious night out drinking (something strong and noxious, probably with an odd name like Left Leg) with Jonson and others.

Ultimately it was Jonson – perhaps his greatest and most constant critic – who gave Shakespeare his most enduring epitaph: "He was not of an age, but for all time."

Ben Jonson died in 1637.

Works by Ben Jonson:

"The Alchemist"

"Cynthia's Revels"

"Every Man in His Humour"

"Every Man out of His Humour"

"Poetaster"

"Volpone"

"Sejanus"

"Catiline"

"Bartholomew Fair"

"The Devil is an Ass"

"Staple of News"

"Eastward Ho!"

"Epicoene"

**Main Part**

**Ben Jonson's Volpone: Issues and Considerations**

1. The opening scene of the play (1.1.1-27) is often considered a satire of some sort on the Catholic Mass. If this is so and considering that Jonson was a Catholic at the time of the writing, why would the author include such a scene?
2. Volpone is set against a background of decadence and corruption in Venice. Renaissance (and Enlightenment) England was publicly suspicious of the supposed corruption that traveling to Italy brought. How does Jonson use this background to further the themes and purpose of his play? Are the images stereotypical?
3. How much is Volpone a play shaped by monetary fears and concerns? How much is it a play about the use and abuse of authority?
4. How would you map out the ascent, climax, and denouement of the main plot? Where does the scene between Celia and Volpone fall? Where do the two court scenes belong?
5. What is the purpose of the subplot involving Sir Pol, Lady Pol, and Peregrine? Does it in any way reflect on the larger plot?
6. What is the role of Nano, Castrone, and Androgyno?
7. How would you play the court Avocatori? Are they primarily serious or farcical characters?
8. How complicit are we as a audience with Volpone and Mosca's vices? Are they too attractive (at first) as characters? Why is Volpone given a chance to address the audience in the closing speech?
9. Is this a comedy? How do you account for the punishments awarded at the end, the vulgar attempted rape by Volpone, and the play's more serious moments? Is the ending comic?

Does this play have (in the end) a positive, ethical message? If so, what is it? If not, why not?

In addition to the reading assignment on the syllabus, please read through the material on this well-researched web page by a student (identified only as "Jason") in Professor Christy Desmet's Renaissance Drama course at the University of Georgia: Venice as the Setting for Volpone

1. In Act I, scene 1 (pp. 1131-2), Volpone lists the many means of making money (honestly and dishonestly) that he does *not* use. What is his "trade"? How does he make his money?

2. Trace the gold imagery in the first three acts. What functions does gold serve in the world of Volpone?

3. Jonson draws on animal fables for his characters' names and personalities. How does this technique affect your expectations as a reader? Does the text fulfill those expectations?

4. Other than Mosca, the only members of Volpone's household are his three servants (rumored to be his illigitimate children). In each of them, the natural body of a man has been in some way warped, mutilated, or curtailed: Nano is a dwarf, Androgyno a hermaphrodite (a person with characteristics of both sexes), and Castrone a eunuch (a castrated male). What is the effect of Volpone's bing surrounded by such creatures?

5. Note the performance given by Nano, Androgyno, and Castrone in Act 1, scene 2. It is a dramatic rendering of a popular Italian prose form, the **paradox**, in which the writer makes a witty display by considering (usually scornfully) some supposedly paradoxical assertion. Donne wrote some such prose paradoxes (e.g., "That a wise man is known by much laughing," which defends that idea in face of the usual proverb that you know a man is a fool if he's always laughing). Volpone's minions present a Praise of Folly. What is the point of this play within a play?

6. In Act 2, scene 1, Peregrine and Sir Politic Would-Be converse. How is this scene related to Act 1? And what is Peregrine's function in the play? How are we (as readers or audience members) to understand his role in relation to the other characters we have seen thus far?

7. In Act 2, scene 2, Volpone adopts the "disguise" he decided to use at the end of Act 1. Taking on the role of the mountebank Scoto of Mantua, he sets up a stage near the house of Corvino. His speeches in the person of Scoto are printed in italics. His act is to hawk "Scoto's Oil" ("oglio del Scoto"), a cure for all ills; how does his performance as Scoto compare to his performance as a dying man in Act 1?

8. Celia appears at her window and throws down a handkerchief full of coins to the supposed mountebank below. Why do you suppose she does this? And what do the various characters in the play assume to be her motivation? Does her motivation matter in the overall scheme of Jonson's play?

9. In scenes 6-7 of Act 2, Corvino's greed takes precedence over his jealousy, so that he becomes willing to become a bawd or pander (i.e., a pimp) selling his own wife to Volpone. Compare his speeches to Celia at the end of scene 5 (lines 48-73) and in scene 7 (lines 6-18). What ironies emerge from the language he uses in each case?

1. At the beginning of Act 3, Mosca speaks a grand soliloquy on his profession: that of the parasite. What is a parasite? Who qualifies as a "sub-parasite"? If "Almost / All the wise world is little else, in nature, / But parasites and sub-parasites," does anyone qualify as another kind of being?

2. Lady Politic Would-Be is, like Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino, a fortune-hunter. But is she in the same category with the other three? What, if anything, sets her apart? As you think about this question, take a look at this web page (again by Jason from the University of Georgia) on Courtesans in Venice.

3. What means does Volpone use in his attempt to seduce Celia in 3.7.139-154? In 154-164 of the same scene? In the "Song" that follows? And in 185-239? All of these attempts at seduction fail because of Celia's unassailable virtue. At what, if anything, do they succeed? Do they have an effect on you as a reader?

4. How do Volpone's addresses to Celia in 3.7 compare with his address to gold in 1.1?

5. Is there any shift in the degree to which the audience (or reader) identifies with Volpone and/or Mosca at various points in the play?

6. What does Peregrine's trick on Sir Pol add to the play's plot and theme?

7. With whom, if anyone, do the audience's (or reader's) sympathies lie in the play's final scenes?

8. Courtroom scenes are versions of the play-within-a-play technique, for lawyers and witnesses are performers very conscious of the audience that will judge them. How good are the performances in the courtroom scene of Act 5, scene 12? How does the courtroom "play" compare to the earlier plays-within-a-play (such as Volpone's deathbed act or his performance as Scoto)? How does the courtroom play-within-a-play relate to the play *Volpone* itself? That is, how do the performances in the courtroom (directed toward the judges) comment on that of the play *Volpone* (directed toward the theater audience)?

5. How do the various punishments meted out to Volpone, Mosca, and the others compare? Why are they so inequitable?

6. In Act 3, attempting to defend against the foul plans of her husband, Mosca, and Volpone, Celia declares her dedication to the preservation of *honor* (her own and her husband's). Corvino's response dismisses her scruples. Is Celia's view of honor vindicated by the end of the play?

7. The *Norton* introduction to the play speculates "that what Venice is in the play, England is about to become, in the city of London, the year of our Lord 1606"; and that Jonson, given his "vigorous social morality, would not have rejected" such an interpretation. Do you agree that Jonson's play is a warning for Englishmen about their own society?

**Ben Jonson : Volpone**

In his earlier plays, Jonson had made characters speak bitterly, expressing direct and dangerous attacks on the social manners of the higher classes. In *Volpone* that never happens. The Prologue boasts that it was written in five weeks (Jonson was usually a slow writer), all by Jonson himself. Then the play is compared with the more vulgar kind of play where there is horseplay and clowning:

And so presents quick comedy refined,

As best critics have designed;

The laws of time, place, persons he observeth,

From no needful rule he swerveth.

All gall and copperas from his ink he draineth,

Only a little salt remaineth. . .

The setting is Venice. **Act One** begins, as Volpone (the 'fox') and his close servant Mosca (the 'fly') celebrate Volpone's morning 'worship' of his gold:

VOLPONE. Good morning to the day; and next, my gold!

Open the shrine, that I may see my saint.

*(Mosca opens the curtain that hides much treasure)*

Hail the world's soul, and mine! more glad than is the teeming earth to see the longed-for sun peep through the horns of the celestial ram, am I, to view thy splendour darkening his;

That lying here, amongst my other hoardes, show'st like a flame by night, or like the day Struck out by chaos, when all darkness fled unto the centre. O thou son of Sol, but brighter than thy father, let me kiss, with adoration, thee, and every relic of sacred treasure in this blessed room. Well did wise poets by thy glorious name title that age which they would have the best;

Thou being the best of things, and far transcending all style of joy, in children, parents, friends, or any other waking dream on earth. Thy looks when they to Venus did ascribe, they should have given her twenty thousand Cupids, such are thy beauties and our loves! Dear saint, Riches, the dumb god, that givest all men tongues, that canst do nought, and yet mak'st men do all things;

The price of soul; even hell, with thee to boot, is made worth heaven. Thou art virtue, fame, honour and all things else. Who can get thee, he shall be noble, valiant, honest, wise - After this blasphemous adoration, Mosca flatters Volpone, stressing that his fortune was was not made by oppressing the poor. Then in a soliloquy, Volpone exposes his method:

I have no wife, no parent, child, ally, to give my substance to, but whom I make must be my heir; and this makes men observe me.

This draws new clients daily to my house, women and men of every sex and age, that bring me presents, send me plate, coin, jewels, with hope that when I die (which they expect each greedy minute) it shall then return Tenfold upon them.

Shakespeare, in *Richard III* and other plays, had already exploited the fact that, in theatre, 'all the world loves a villain.' Volpone is a shameless villain, quite open about his deceptions, inviting the audience (through Mosca) to admire his skills at manipulating human greed. The play then has an 'interlude' in which Volpone's 'creatures' -- a dwarf, an eunuch and a fool -- entertain him in grotesque imitation of court entertainments.

The action begins with the arrival, one by one, of Volpone's 'clients,' whom he despises. To receive them he pretends to be terribly sick. The first is Signor Voltore (the 'vulture') who is a lawyer. Mosca assures him that he is Volpone's only heir. Then comes Corbaccio (the 'raven'), who is old and deaf and impatient. He offers some medecine that Mosca recognizes as a poison, then produces a bag of gold. Mosca says he will use it to excite Volpone to make a will in Corbaccio's favour, then suggests that Corbaccio should make a will naming Volpone his sole heir, in place of his son, as proof of his love. When the next client comes, Corvino the merchant (the 'crow'), Volpone seems to be at death's door, though he still has the strength to grasp a pearl and diamond Corvino has brought. Mosca invites his to shout insults at him, saying that he is quite unconscious, then suggests that they should suffocate Volpone with a pillow; this frightens Corvino, though he does not condemn Mosca for the idea. Finally, after mentioning the English visitor Lady Would-be, Mosca tells Volpone of the beauty of Corvino's young wife, who is jealously guarded. This makes Volpone long to see her.

**Act Two** begins with the play's sub-plot, that is often omitted in modern productions; the English traveller Sir Politic Would-be holds a conversation with another English traveller, Peregrine, showing himself to be vain and foolish. Volpone arrives disguised as a mountebank and begins a long speech boasting of the qualities of his special medicine. Corvino's wife, Celia, throws down some money from a window and Volpone tosses back his potion. Corvino suddenly appears and chases him away.

Volpone is love-struck and asks Mosca to get Celia for him. Meanwhile we see Corvino violently abusing his wife, mad with jealousy. Mosca arrives, saying that Volpone is a little better after using the mountebank's potion! The doctors, he says, have decided that he should have a young woman in bed with him, so that some of her energy may pass into him. Mosca says that one of the doctors offered his daughter, a virgin, sure that Volpone would not be able to harm her, and he urges Corvino to find someone first, since Volpone might change his will. Corvino decides to offer Celia!

**Act Three** begins with Mosca's praise of himself; the true parasite, he says, Is a most precious thing, droppped from above, Not bred 'mongst clods and clodpoles here on earth. I muse the mystery was not made a science, It is so liberally professed! Almost All the wise world is little else, in nature, But parasites or sub-parasites. He meets Corbaccio's son, Bonario, who belongs to a different universe; he is honest and frank, and despises Mosca. Mosca pretends to weep, and Bonario is at once touched with pity. Mosca then tells him that his father is making a will leaving everything to Volpone, disinheriting him! He offers to bring him to the place where it will be done.

There follows an interview between Volpone and Lady Politic Would-be, who settles down and offers to make him some medecines. Volpone finds her a torment; Mosca arrives and urges her to leave quickly because he has just seen Sir Politic rowing off with a famous prostitute! As she leaves, he brings Bonario into the house, telling him to hide in a cupboard from where he will hear his father disinherit him. Then things become complicated, Corvino arrives with Celia, earlier than Mosca had expected them. He sends Bonario out into the corridor, while Corvino tells Celia why she is here. As a noble and faithful wife, she is horrified and begs him not to ask her to do such a thing. He insists, with horrible threats if she does not obey. At last Mosca drags him out, leaving Celia alone with Volpone who leaps from the bed, and begins to woo her, even singing an erotic carpe diem song:

Come, my Celia, let us prove, while we can, the sports of love;

Time will not be ours forever, he at length our good will sever;

Spend not then his gifts in vain. Suns that set may rise again;

But if once we lose this light, 'Tis with us perpetual night. Why should we defer our joys? Fame and rumour are but toys. Cannot we delude the eyes of a few poor household spies? Or his easier ears beguile, Thus removed by our wile? This no sin love's fruits to steal;

But the sweet theft to reveal, to be taken, to be seen, those have crimes accounted been.

Volpone is almost mad with desire, and begins to describe various kinds of erotic activities they could perform. She prays for pity, and when he seizes her, screams. Bonario rushes in to save her, and carries her off, wounding Mosca on the way. Volpone and Mosca are horrified, but Corbaccio's arrival gives Mosca an idea. He tells Corbaccio that Bonario has learned of his plan with the will and is threatening to kill him; Voltore has also come, unseen, and overhears Mosca being flattering to Corbaccio. He challenges him, and Mosca at once explains that he had planned that Bonario should kill his father, whose property would come to Volpone and so to Voltore. Voltore believes him; Mosca then says that Bonario has run off with Celia, intending to say that Volpone had tried to rape her so as to discredit him. Voltore decides to bring this matter to the judges, in order to stop Bonario.

**Act Four** begins with the continuation of the Sir Politic sub- plot; Lady Would-be thinks that Peregrine is the famous prostitute disguised and begins to scold him. Mosca comes and tells her that she is wrong, that the woman in question has been brought to the judges. The court scene begins. As the judges enter they are on the side of the young people, and order Volpone to be brought, although Mosca and the others assert he is too weak to move.

Voltore speaks, claiming that Celia and Bonario had long been lovers, that they had been caught, but forgiven by Corvino; that Corbaccio had decided to disown his son for his vice, and that Bonario had come to Volpone's house intending to kill his father. Unable to do so, he says, he attacked Volpone and Mosca, and resolved with Celia to accuse Volpone of rape. Corbaccio publicly rejects Bonario as his son, Corvino swears that his wife has cheated him with Bonario. Mosca supports their story with his wound. In addition, he claims to have seen Celia in the company of Sir Politic, and Lady Politic bursts in, claiming that she has seen them too!

The entry of Volpone, carried in apparently dying, seemingly quite unconscious and paralysed, is decisive for the judges. The two young people are arrested and Mosca sends away the hopeful clients, each of them convinced that Volpone's fortune is their's.

**Act Five** finds Volpone recovering from the strain. He orders his creatures to announce his death in the streets; then he makes a will in which Mosca is declared his heir and goes to hide behind a curtain, intending to watch the effect on each one. Voltore arrives first, as Mosca is busy making a list of goods; Corbaccio follows, then Corvino, and Lady Politic. Each is surprised to see the others. Volpone comments on their conduct in asides from behind the curtain. Mosca continues to write, then hands them the will, that they read together, although Corbaccio only finds Mosca's name a while later than the others. Mosca sends Lady Politic away first, then Corvino, Corbaccio, and finally Voltore, after giving to each a moralizing summary of their previous actions.

Volpone is delighted, wishes he could see their disappointment out on the streets. Mosca suggests that he disguise himself as a common sergeant. There is an interlude where Peregrine in disguise tells Sir Politic that he has been denounced as a foreign agent. Sir Politic decides to disguise himself in a huge turtle's shell; Peregrine brings in some merchants to admire the beast, and they torment Sir Politic. He decides to leave at once. Volpone dresses as a soldier, Mosca has put on a nobleman's dress; they plan to go walking in the streets, but Mosca tells us he plans to make Volpone share his fortune with him, and stays behind in control of the house. Volpone congratulates each of the clients on their good fortune, and enjoys their fury.

They are all going to the court, where Bonario and Celia are to be sentenced. Voltore suddenly begins to repent, and is about to tell the truth, it seems. He has written certain aspects of the truth in his notes. The others claim that he has been bewitched; news of Volpone's death supports their story. As Voltore is about to speak, the disguised Volpone whispers to him that Mosca wants him to know that in fact Volpone is not yet dead and that he is still the heir. Voltore pretends to collapse and Volpone declares that an evil spirit has just left him. He rises, and declares that Volpone is alive. Mosca comes in, and insists Volpone is dead. Meanwhile, Volpone has realized Mosca's plan against him; he tries to negociate in whispers, but Mosca rejects him and asks the judges to punish him.

In despair, Volpone throws off his disguise, and everything becomes clear; Bonario and Celia are freed, Mosca is condemned to be a 'perpetual prisoner in our galleys,' prison ships where no one survived long. All Volpone's fortune is confiscated to help the sick, and he is to stay in prison until he is 'sick and lame indeed.' Voltore is banished, Corbaccio sent to a monastery to die, Corvino will be rowed round Venice wearing ass's ears then put in the pillory, and Celia is returned to her family with three times her dowry.

## Ben Jonson’s Volpone: black comedy from the dawn of the modern era

In response to the Sydney Theatre Company’s (STC) production of Ben Jonson’s *Volpone* last year, I determined to undertake a study of the life and work of this extraordinary playwright and poet. Although his work is seldom performed these days, Jonson was one of the leading protagonists in the most vibrant period of early English theatre. For a time, he was considered the virtual Poet Laureate of England. His literary stature rivalled, and for the century after his death, even overshadowed that of Shakespeare.

*Volpone* is recognised as one of Jonson’s major works. Some 400 years after it was written, the play, about compulsive acquisitiveness and abuse of privilege, still resonates with its audience. The characters—or caricatures—remain recognisable, as does Jonson’s exposure of the pomposity of the legal system and the hypocrisy of wealthy lawyers who are prepared to argue anything for a price.

Understanding Jonson’s life and work proved to be more difficult than I imagined. Although much has been written on the subject, most of it divorces the playwright and his plays from their historical context in England and the wider social and political ferment that was underway in Europe. Jonson, like his literary creation Volpone, was very much larger than life. But he can be easily lost in an examination of the minutiae of his work.

I hope that in my preliminary investigations, I have managed to avoid this pitfall.

**Ben Jonson’s Literary Activity**

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”.

Jonson’s 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.

**The English theatre**

Established theatre was still a relatively new phenomenon in sixteenth century England. The first permanent legal theatre was established up in London in 1552. Before that, performances were carried out on temporary platforms set up in taverns and inns. Entertainment at the new venues ranged from bear baiting to performances for the royal court.

Jonson was almost a generation younger than the major Elizabethan writers Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare who led the theatrical exploration of new aspects of the human experience. He records his appreciation of Shakespeare in a poem where he notes that “he was not of an age but for all time.”

The first mention of Jonson in the theatre comes in 1597 in a note for a four-pound loan given to him for his work as an actor by the entrepreneur William Henslowe. That same year Jonson was imprisoned for his part in writing a play called *The Isle of Dogs,* a satirical work mocking the Scots.

Released soon after, Jonson quickly became better known for his writing than his acting, producing works for the leading theatres of the day. *Every Man in His Humour*, finished in late 1598, established him as a major writer of comedy and satire. Its first performance was at Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre.

But Jonson was again imprisoned, this time for killing an associate actor in a duel. He was acquitted only after successfully pleading “benefit of clergy”—a law allowing for the pardoning of defendants due to their literacy.

Jonson was one of the most educated writers of the day. He had a profound knowledge of Latin and Greek theatre and poetry and, like many artists of the period, he developed his work within the framework established by the classics. In all the arts and sciences, the heritage of Greece and Rome was being rediscovered and re-assimilated.

The English Renaissance writers reworked classical, traditional and contemporary stories. Shakespeare, for example, reworked an already rephrased English translation of an Italian story for his *Romeo and Juliet* (1595), which the Spanish playwright Lope de Vega retold as a tragicomedy in 1608. Christopher Marlowe’s epic poem *Hero and Leander*, which is based on an ancient Greek myth, says more about the customs of contemporary England than of the ancient Greeks. The art was in the telling, not in the creation, of the stories.

Jonson is often accused of being constricted in his writing by classical references. But he was in no way overawed by the classics. In fact, part of his creative genius was his ability to rework themes and ideas to fit the contemporary setting. Many of the sources were so seamlessly integrated into his stories that only after centuries of scholarship were the connections established between his work and that of earlier writers.

He drew directly on ancient mythology in his masques for the royal court. Masques were highly stylised theatrical events performed for and by the members of the aristocracy. With Jonson and his sometime collaborator, architect Inigo Jones, the masque developed from a relatively simplistic entertainment into an elaborate (although rather self indulgent and hugely expensive) art form.

The playwright was also influenced by European theatre, particularly the Italian Commedia dell’arte. Commedia dell’arte troupes had toured London in the late 1590s and a number of the characters in *Volpone* have their direct counterparts in this Italian theatrical form. Jonson’s Volpone, for example, fits well within the range of the Commedia’s Pantalone, whose character ranged from a miserly and ineffectual old man to an energetic cuckolder with “almost animal ferocity and agility”. In the play, Jonson integrates this influence with classical references, as well as English and European folk mythology and theatrical styles.

Jonson also drew on the English tradition of medieval morality plays, where actors personified human characteristics such as Virtue, Vice, Lechery or Curiosity to illustrate moral lessons. The plots were generally limited, since the moral points were universal rather than specific.

Jonson welded all these influences into a theatre that was purposeful and aimed at playing a critical role in society. His comedies brought a new realism as well as a sharp eye for outlining human character types. As one writer commented, he gave “a new sense of the interdependence of character and society”.

While *Volpone* was set in Venice, London audiences were well able to recognise its themes. For his realism, Jonson was attacked at the time as “a meere Empyrick, one that gets what he hath by observation”. But four centuries on, his ability to capture social contradictions and present them in a captivating form continues to resonate.

Through the play*,* considered by some his masterpiece, Jonson portrays with a black humour a society in which the pursuit of wealth and individual self-interest have become primary. Venice was regarded as the epitome of a sophisticated commercial city and virtually all the characters are revealed as corrupt or compromised.

Volpone means “fox” in Italian. Jonson based his story around medieval and Aesopian tales in which a fox pretends to be dead in order to catch the carrion birds that come to feed on its carcass. In the play, Volpone is a single and aging Venetian “magnifico” who has devised a trick to fleece his neighbours while simultaneously nourishing his sense of superiority over his hapless victims. For three years he has pretended to be dying, so as to encourage legacy hunters to bring gifts in the hope of being named as his beneficiary.

With the aid of his servant Mosca, Volpone strings along his suitors—Voltore, Corbaccio and Corvino—extracting their wealth by feeding their avarice. (Voltore Corbaccio and Corvino are the Italian names for vulture, crow and raven.) Voltore, a lawyer, offers Volpone a platter made of precious metal. Corbaccio, a doddering gentleman, is talked into disinheriting his son Bonario in favour of Volpone, while Corvino, a miserly merchant and hugely jealous husband, is driven by greed to offer his young wife Celia to bed and comfort the supposedly dying Volpone.

Here Volpone, a rogue whose victims trap themselves by their own weaknesses (and are therefore deserving of their respective fates) becomes overwhelmed by his own passions. Definitely not at death’s door and completely obsessed, he tries to force himself onto Celia and is only stopped by the lucky appearance of Bonario. The two innocents bring charges in court against the old man. But countercharges of adultery and fornication against Celia and Bonario are laid by the three legacy hunters who are desperate to defend what each considers his own future wealth.

Volpone revels in these ever-widening displays of degradation. He decides to stage his own death so he can witness their frenzy when they see him bequeathing his wealth to Mosca. However, after Mosca begins preparing the elaborate funeral, he ceases to acknowledge his former master. As the heir to Volpone’s great wealth, Mosca is transformed in the eyes of the courtroom judges—who are as self-serving as the rest—from a lowly servant into an eligible young man to whom they might marry their daughters.

Desperate not to be outfoxed by his servant, Volpone reveals himself, thus exposing his own and everyone else’s guilt. He is stripped of his wealth, which is given to charity, and sentenced to prison, while Mosca is condemned to the galleys for passing himself off as a person of breeding. Voltore, the advocate, is debarred from the court and Corbaccio’s wealth is transferred to his son Bonario. Corvino is paraded through Venice as an ass, while his wife Celia is sent home to her family with triple her dowry.

Jonson skillfully manipulates the audience so that it identifies with Volpone and his brazen schemes. The old magnifico’s zest is infective and the audience is swept along with his machinations only to find itself, along with the anti-hero, hovering at the edge of criminality. In this way, the author tries to confront us with the dangers of unrestrained self-interest and with what Jonson considers to be a necessary sense of social responsibility.

Genre: Comic drama, but also a satire.

Form: blank verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter) mixed with comic song. Since the "plot" is a low criminal conspiracy (but what was the rebellion against Henry IV or Lear?), the "subplot" is a parody of criminal conspiracy set in Venice but involving an English traveler, an English nobleman and his wife, all of whom are on tour.

**Characters and Summary:** This plot closely parallels Horace's satire on legacy hunters (Book II.7) but dramatizes it with characters whose flattened, comic/satiric personas represent various types of human personality as they are distorted by greed, lust, and sheer perversity. Jonson alerts us to the symbolic order of the action's meaning by means of the names he assigns the primary characters: **Volpone** (fox--deceiver), **Mosca** (fly--parasite), **Voltore** (vulture--scavenger/lawyer), **Corbaccio** (crow--wealthy but still greedy man), and **Corvino** (raven, another scavenger--the wealthy merchant who can't get enough). These characters all seek to be named Volpone's heir in order to gain his treasure, but they offer him gifts to achieve that honor, and he (though nowhere near death) strings them along, more in love with his delight in deceiving them than even his beloved gold. A love plot is attached to this legacy-hunt, involving **Corvino's wife** (Celia) and **Corbaccio's son** (Bonario), but one of the play's puzzles is that they are such relatively lifeless, though moral, characters. Below these levels, three more sets of characters populate the stage. **Nano** (a dwarf), **Castrone** (an eunuch), and **Androgyno** (a hermaphrodite) join Mosca as Volpone's courtiers, **Sir Poltic Would-be** and his wife are deceived by **Peregrine** (the young English man on the Continental tour), and the elders of Venice alternately try to profit from and to bring justice to the confusion (**Commendatori** [sheriffs], **Mercatori** [merchants], **Avocatori** [lawyers, brothers of Corvino], and **Notario** [the court's registrar]).

So the plot, in brief, is that the conspirators try to deceive Volpone, but he's really deceiving them, until his agent (Mosca) deceives him (and them) and they bring him to the court, which they all try to deceive, until they are unmasked (while Peregrine is being deceived by and deceiving Sir and Lady Politic Would-be). Got it?

1. You have seen, in Marlowe and Shakespeare, the strategies of pitting a subplot's comic agenda against that of a tragic main plot.
   * How would you discuss sub-plot and main plot in this play?
   * What does that tell you about Volpone's basic strategy regarding the play's goals and his manipulation of the audience's sympathies? For instance, compare the characters of Volpone and Henry IV or Lear, and try to argue for which is the more attractive title character.)
2. Jonson argues, elsewhere, that drama should be evaluated with respect to some special forms of truth. For instance, he considers "truth to type" as a good test of characters, asking whether that sort of person would have done what the character did.
   * What kinds of normative judgments does this require, and how does that affect the play's socio-political agendas?
3. Jonson parodies many classical lyric forms (see below re: Catullus) but his most outrageous is his first, a satire on the aubade or dawn song usually sung by a lover to the beloved (and answered by her) upon their seeing the first rays of light which end their illicit night of passion.
   * Volpone's, which begins Act I.i, praises the beauty of some other phenomenon--what is it, and how does he describe it? His character here is almost a literal transcription of some medieval morality play "vice" figures.
   * Where would you go in Shakespeare to find a similar meditation wherein a character reveals his soul, inner nature, strategy, etc.?
4. A typical measure of dramatic structure is the relationship between chaos and order. As the comedy unwinds, chaos increases, and as it approaches its end, the chaos ought either to increase to a catastrophe (duck blows up hunter, dog, hunter's house, doghouse) or to a restoration of order (duck returned to wild, hunter to home, dog to doghouse). Generally speaking, many comedies approach an apex of their disorder around the third act.
   * What's happening when Mosca walks on stage in III.i?
   * Especially, how does his soliloquy illustrate the dangers of Count Canossa's prescription for a courtier's development in Hoby's translation of The Courtier?
   * How might this relate to Jonson's politics in the Jacobean period, especially to the rise of new courtiers to power in James I's reign?
   * This play ends with the "Volpone" character coming to the edge of the stage to deliver a curious apology for the play's bad behavior and to ask the audience for forgiving applause. What does this suggest about Jonson's view of the play's "moral center" vs. the astonishing success of immorality for most of the play's acts?
5. The play's content and style draw upon an aesthetic trend called neoclassicism, a set of rules and habits of composition based on imitation of Greek and Roman classical models for literature. You can see this in the prologue's boast about following the so-called "Aristotelian unities" of place, time and action. Volpone's paen to Celia (III.7) is sung in a voice borrowed from Catullus (#5), the song to "Lesbia" which dares her to defy convention and old men's jealousy to seek the plenitude of pleasure her lover promises. Compare the two. To read a Roman poem Jonson may have had in mind re: "legacy hunting," check out Project Perseus's online version of Horace's satire on the topic (Book II, number 5). (Horace imagines a satiric/comic addition to the scene in Homer's *Odyssey* Book 12 when Odysseus, in the Underworld, asks the spirit of the prophet Teiresias to tell him how to return home to Ithaka where young bachelors are devouring his household while waiting for his wife to choose one of them.)
   * What does Catullus offer and how does it differ from Volpone's deal for Celia?

Those of you who have taken English 215 (Critical Methods) and those who have discovered something of literary criticism's theoretical bases on their own may be ready to start thinking about final papers even now. Imagine how good a paper you could write if you started working on it with six weeks left to go in the semester! Imagine how thoroughly you could think through the argument and polish your own prose. The final paper assignment stipulates only that the topic should be based mainly on one text we've read since the midterm exam and that it also should deal with at least one text from the first half of the semester. (Exceptions might be two sections from a very large work we read after the midterm, like *Paradise Lost* or *Oroonoko*.) You can center your analysis on one text, using the other for comparison and contrast, or you can do a balanced analysis of both. You also could refer to more than one subordinate text to help unpack your argument about the main, post-midterm text. Though you may have "hunches" or even full-blown insights about the play that typical audiences would not detect, those hunches and insights all depend on some basic assumptions about how to read plays which you probably have unconsciously absorbed from your previous teachers. Rather than charging at the play's evidence without being aware of your theoretical approach's assumptions, you may benefit from approaching the task of writing with a theory of interpretation in mind. **Jonson’s social outlook**

Ben Jonson’s realism relates to his view of the role of artist/poet in society. As a child, he had been fortunate to attend Westminster School, where he came under the influence of the noted historian and antiquarian William Camden. There he embraced the humanist outlook of the Renaissance, which emphasised respect for the dignity and rights of man and the idea that knowledge advanced the human condition.

This was a time of political and social convulsion throughout Europe. The humanist ideas of the Renaissance were followed by the Reformation. Within the framework of the day, Jonson was no radical. Like others, he viewed the absolute monarchy, balanced between the old aristocracy and the emerging capitalist class, as a guarantor of culture against the challenge from parliament and the Puritan church. Along with figures like Sir Francis Bacon, he distrusted parliament as a vehicle for the self-interest of landowners, merchants and their agents.

In his posthumously published writings—*Timber: or, Discoveries Made Upon Men and Matter: As they have flow’d out of his daily Readings; or had their refluxe to his peculiar Notion of the Times*—Jonson wrote: “*Suffrages* in Parliament are numbred, not weigh’d: nor can it bee otherwise in those publike *Councels*, where nothing is so unequall, as the equality: for there, how odde soever mens braines, or wisdomes are, their power is alwayes even, and the same.”

In a Europe that was still struggling to reappropriate the intellectual conquests of the classical civilisations, and where the vast majority had little or no education, Jonson’s emphasis on the differing “weight” of people’s opinions was at least understandable. In his view, the monarchy provided an environment in which learning and culture could develop. In turn, that enlightened climate would nurture an enlightened and benevolent monarch.

Jonson wrote in *Timber*: “Learning needs rest: Soveraignty gives it. Soveraignty needs counsell: Learning affords it. There is such a Consociation of offices, betweene the *Prince*, and whom his favour breeds, that they may helpe to sustaine his power, as hee their knowledge.” He added further on: *“A Prince* without Letters, is a Pilot without eyes ... And how can he be counsell’d that cannot see to read the best Counsellors (which are books).”

Jonson conceived his role as providing insight into the problems of the day. Thus, he approached society critically. His works are infused with a refusal to sidestep social contradictions. For Jonson, “*Truth* is mans proper good; and the onely *immortall* thing, was given to our mortality to use”. His creative function was to express the complexities of life and truth in a form that could be appreciated by the common man.

Jonson’s plays challenged the audience to examine the impact of a society governed by deceit and subterfuge. His strength lay in his ability to confront those watching with life as he saw it. In his ability to recreate theatrically the contemporary world and identify both general and specific aspects of the human experience, he was opening new ground that would be further explored in the ensuing centuries.

**The Alchemist**

Having the good fortune of living in NYC where not one, but two Elizabethan plays are being produced within walking distance of our apartment, Stan and I went to see Ben Johnson's *The Alchemist* on Saturday afternoon.

The Classic Stage Company takes exactly the opposite approach to the staging the classics as does The Pearl, so it was fun to see these two plays on the same weekend. Philosophically, it appears that the CSC wants to bring out the similarities between early 17th century England and early 21st century USA. With *The Alchemist* they have found the perfect play. The characters in this very funny production are all looking for the quick buck, easy magic to solve the unsolvable, and generally anything that will feed into their insatiable fantasies. And of course, there are the con artists to take advantage of the gullible. Does this sound familiar? Well, apparently it was familiar in the 17th century as well.

This production is definitely not for traditionalists. It is in the Joanne Akalitis school of direction, although we have Barry Edelstein directing. He has pulled out the motorcycle outfit, the stereo systems and a great flashing Christmas light costume worn by Johann Carlo in her "Queen of Fairy" con. There are chemical reactions of all types and colors in attempts to turn metal to gold, and explosions with lots of smoke. Since we're dealing with a satirical comedy here and not a Shakespearean tragedy, somehow it seems all in good fun.

*The Alchemist* is about a trio of con artists who decide to make easy cash by turning base metal into gold. Face, a servant whose master has left town to avoid the plague, has turned the house into their "criminal headquarters.” The criminals quickly come up with clients for 5 different cons, each suited to the customer’s needs. And, as expected, they are all willing to give over huge amounts of money for anticipated future rewards.

Although I'm not a big fan of using modern equipment in 17th century drama, somehow *The Alchemist* lends itself to update. I guess the basic greed in humans has not changed all that much over the last 400 years. Certainly, with all the psychic fads, get rich quick schemes and other promises of quick fixes for difficult situations, I'm quite sure a clever alchemist could con many of us very easily even today. [[1]](#footnote-1)

Naturally, the language is rich in this play and doesn't lend itself quite as easily to understanding as a Seinfeld episode on a similar subject, however, that's what the theater is all about. We work a little harder to get a much higher level of reward.

The actors give it their all. Jeremy Shamos is continuously changing his costumes as well as character. Dan Castillaneta is terrific as the Alchemist and Johann Carlo is very funny as the tough, scheming 'working woman' of the con. All their pathetic clients come one at a time for their individual scalping. I particularly enjoyed the performances of Michael Showalter as a low clerk, Umit Celebi as Tribulation Wholesome as a pastor and Lee Sellars as Sir Epicure Mammon, a Knight.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Let's face it. Maybe this would be better in a more traditional style and maybe we should be annoyed with the liberties taken with text and production. However, beggars can't be choosers. When was the last production of *The Alchemist* in NYC and when will the next one appear? I say thank you to the CSC for presenting this work. I suggest you not wait for perfection, but try to relax and have fun.

**Ben Jonson’s other comedies**

English dramatist, born probably in Westminster, in the beginning of the year 1573 (or possibly, if he reckoned by the unadopted modern calendar, 1572). By the poet's account his grandfather had been a gentleman who came from Carlisle, and originally, the grandson thought, from Annandale. His arms, "three spindles or rhombi", are the family device of the Johnstones of Annandale, a fact which confirms his assertion of Border descent. Ben Jonson further related that he was born a month after the death of his father, who, after suffering in estate and person under Queen Mary, had in the end "turned minister." Two years after the birth of her son the widow married again; she may be supposed to have loved him in a passionate way peculiar to herself, since on one occasion we find her revealing an almost ferocious determination to save his honor at the cost of both his life and her own. Jonson's stepfather was a master bricklayer, living in Hartshorn Lane, near Charing Cross, who provided his stepson with the foundations of a good education. After attending a private school in St. Martin's Lane, the boy was sent to Westminster School at the expense, it is said, of William Camden. Jonson's gratitude for an education to which in truth he owed an almost inestimable debt concentrated itself upon the "most reverend head" of his benefactor, then second and afterwards head master of the famous school, and the firm friend of his pupil in later life.

After reaching the highest form at Westminster, Jonson is stated, but on unsatisfactory evidence, to have proceeded to Cambridge -- according to Fuller, to St. John's College. He says, however, himself that he studied at neither university, but was put to a trade immediately on leaving school. He soon had enough of the trade, which was no doubt his father's bricklaying, for Henslowe in writing to Edward Alleyne of his affair with Gabriel Spenser calls him "bergemen [sic] Jonson, bricklayer." Either before or after his marriage -- more probably before, as Sir Francis Vere's three English regiments were not removed from the Low Countries until 1592 -- he spent some time in that country soldiering, much to his own subsequent satisfaction when the days of self-conscious retrospect arrived, but to no further purpose beyond that of seeing something of the world.

Ben Jonson married not later than 1592. The registers of St. Martin's Church state that his eldest daughter Maria died in November 1593 when she was, Jonson tells us (epigram 22), only six months old. His eldest son Benjamin died of the plague ten years later (epigram 45). A younger Benjamin died in 1635. His wife Jonson characterized to Drummond as "a shrew, but honest"; and for a period (undated) of five years he preferred to live without her, enjoying the hospitality of Lord Aubigny (afterwards duke of Lennox). Long burnings of oil among his books, and long spells of recreation at the tavern, such as Jonson loved, are not the most favored accompaniments of family life. But Jonson was no stranger to the tenderest of affections: two at least of the several children whom his wife bore to him he commemorated in touching little tributes of verse; nor in speaking of his lost eldest daughter did he forget "her mother's tears." By the middle of 1597 we come across further documentary evidence of him at home in London in the shape of an entry in Philip Henslowe's diary (July 28) of 3s. 6d. "received of Bengemenes Johnsones share." He was therefore by this time -- when Shakespeare, his senior by nearly nine years, was already in prosperous circumstances and good esteem -- at least a regular member of the acting profession, with a fixed engagement in the lord admiral's company, then performing under Henslowe's management at the Rose. Perhaps he had previously acted at the Curtain (a former house of the lord admiral's men), and "taken mad Jeronimo's part" on a play-wagon in the highway. This latter appearance, if it ever took place, would, as was pointed out by Gifford, probably have been in Thomas Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*, since in *The First Part of Jeronimo* Jonson would have had, most inappropriately, to dwell on the "smallness" of his "bulk." He was at a subsequent date (1601) employed by Henslowe to write up *The Spanish Tragedy*, and this fact may have given rise to Wood's story of his performance as a stroller. Jonson's additions, which were not the first changes made in the play, are usually supposed to be those printed with *The Spanish Tragedy* in the edition of 1602; Charles Lamb's doubts on the subject, which were shared by Coleridge, seem an instance of that subjective kind of criticism which it is unsafe to follow when the external evidence to the contrary is so strong.

According to Aubrey, whose statement must be taken for what it is worth, "Jonson was never a good actor, but an excellent instructor." His physique was certainly not well adapted to the histrionic conditions of his -- perhaps of any -- day; but, in any case, it was not long before he found his place in the organism of his company. In 1597, as we know from Henslowe, Jonson undertook to write a play for the lord admiral's men; and in the following year he was mentioned by Merès in his *Palladis Tamia* as one of "the best for tragedy", without any reference to a connection on his part with the other branch of the drama. Whether this was a criticism based on material evidence or an unconscious slip, Ben Jonson in the same year 1598 produced one of the most famous of English comedies, *Every Man in his Humour*, which was first acted -- probably in the earlier part of September -- by the lord chamberlain's company at the Curtain. Shakespeare was one of the actors in Jonson's comedy, and it is in the character of Old Knowell in this very play that, according to a bold but ingenious guess, he is represented in the half-length portrait of him in the folio of 1623, beneath which were printed Jonson's lines concerning the picture. *Every Man in his Humour* was published in 1601; the critical prologue first appears in the folio of 1616, and there are other divergences. After the Restoration the play was revived in 1751 by David Garrick (who acted Kitely) with alterations, and long continued to be known on the stage. It was followed in the same year by *The Case is Altered*, acted by the children of the queen's revels, which contains a satirical attack upon the pageant poet, Anthony Munday. This comedy, which was not included in the folio editions, is one of intrigue rather than of character; it contains obvious reminiscences of Shylock and his daughter. The earlier of these two comedies was indisputably successful.

Before the year 1598 was out, however, Jonson found himself in prison and in danger of the gallows. In a duel, fought on the 22nd of September in Hogsden Fields, he had killed an actor of Henslowe's company named Gabriel Spenser. The quarrel with Henslowe consequent on this event may account for the production of *Every Man in his Humour* by the rival company. In prison Jonson was visited by a Roman Catholic priest, and the result (certainly strange, if Jonson's parentage is considered) was his conversion to the Church of Rome, to which he adhered for twelve years. Jonson was afterwards a diligent student of divinity; but, though his mind was religious, it is not probable that its natural bias much inclined it to dwell upon creeds and their controversies. He pleaded guilty to the charge brought against him, as the rolls of Middlesex sessions show; but, after a short imprisonment, he was released by benefit of clergy, forfeiting his "goods and chattels", and being branded on his left thumb. The affair does not seem to have affected his reputation; in 1599 he is found back again at work for Henslowe, receiving together with Thomas Dekker, Chettle and "another gentleman", earnest-money for a tragedy (undiscovered) called *Robert II, King of Scots*. In the same year he brought out through the lord chamberlain's company (possibly already at the Globe, then newly built or building) the elaborate comedy of *Every Man out of his Humour* (quarto 1600; folio 1616) -- a play subsequently presented before Queen Elizabeth. The sunshine of court favor, rarely diffused during her reign in rays otherwise than figuratively golden, was not to bring any material comfort to the most learned of her dramatists, before there was laid upon her the inevitable hand of which his courtly epilogue had besought death to forget the use. Indeed, of his *Cynthia's Revels*, performed by the chapel children in 1600 and printed with the first title of *The Fountain of Self-Love* in 1601, though it was no doubt primarily designed as a compliment to the queen, the most marked result had been to offend two playwrights of note -- Dekker, with whom he had formerly worked in company, and who had a healthy if rough grip of his own; and Marston, who was perhaps less dangerous by his strength than by his versatility. According to Jonson, his quarrel with Marston had begun by the latter attacking his morals, and in the course of it they came to blows, and might have come to worse. In *Cynthia's Revels*, Dekker is generally held to be satirized as Hedon, and Marston as Anaides (Fleay, however, thinks Anaides is Dekker, and Hedon Daniel), while the character of Crites most assuredly has some features of Jonson himself. Learning the intention of the two writers whom he had satirized, or at all events of Dekker, to wreak literary vengeance upon him, he anticipated them in *The Poetaster* (1601), again played by the children of the queen's chapel at the Blackfriars and printed in 1602; Marston and Dekker are here ridiculed respectively as the aristocratic Crispinus and the vulgar Demetrius. The play was completed fifteen weeks after its plot was first conceived. It is not certain to what the proceedings against author and play before the lord chief justice, referred to in the dedication of the edition of 1616, had reference, or when they were instituted. Fleay's supposition that the "purge", said in the *Returne from Parnassus* (Part II, act IV, scene III) to have been administered by Shakespeare to Jonson in return for Horace's "pill to the poets" in this piece, consisted of *Troilus and Cressida* is supremely ingenious, but cannot be examined here. As for Dekker, he retaliated on *The Poetaster* by the *Satiromastix, or The Untrussing of the Humorous Poet* (1602). Some more last words were indeed attempted on Jonson's part, but in the *Apologetic Dialogue* added to *The Poetaster* in the edition of 1616, though excluded from that of 1602, he says he intends to turn his attention to tragedy. This intention he apparently carried out immediately, for in 1602 he received £10 from Henslowe for a play, entitled *Richard Crookbacke*, now lost -- unfortunately so, for purposes of comparison in particular, even if it was only, as Fleay conjectures, "an alteration of Marlowe's play." According to a statement by Overbury, early in 1603, "Ben Johnson, the poet, now lives upon one Townesend", supposed to have been the poet and masque-writer Aurelian Townshend, at one time steward to the 1st earl of Salisbury, "and scornes the world." To his other early patron, Lord Aubigny, Jonson dedicated the first of his two extant tragedies, *Sejanus*, produced by the king's servants at the Globe late in 1603, Shakespeare once more taking a part in the performance. Either on its performance or on its appearing in print in 1605, Jonson was called before the privy council by the Earl of Northampton. But it is open to question whether this was the occasion on which, according to Jonson's statement to Drummond, Northampton "accused him both of popery and treason." Though, for one reason or another, unsuccessful at first, the endurance of its reputation is attested by its performance, in a German version by an Englishman, John Michael Girish, at the court of the grandson of James I at Heidelberg.

When the reign of James I opened in England and an adulatory loyalty seemed intent on showing that it had not exhausted itself at the feet of Gloriana, Jonson's well-stored brain and ready pen had their share in devising and executing ingenious variations on the theme "Welcome -- since we cannot do without thee!" With extraordinary promptitude his genius, which, far from being "ponderous" in its operations, was singularly swift and flexible in adapting itself to the demands made upon it, met the new taste for masques and entertainments -- new of course in degree rather than in kind -- introduced with the new reign and fostered by both the king and his consort. The pageant which on the 7th of May 1603 bade the king welcome to a capital dissolved in joy was partly of Jonson's, partly of Dekker's, devising; and he was able to deepen and diversify the impression by the composition of masques presented to James I when entertained at houses of the nobility. *The Satyr* (1603) was produced on one of these occasions, Queen Anne's sojourn at Althorpe, the seat of Sir Robert Spencer, afterwards Lord Althorpe, who seems to have previously bestowed some patronage upon him. *The Penates* followed on Mayday 1604 at the house of Sir William Cornwallis at Highgate, and the queen herself with her ladies played his *Masque of Blackness* at Whitehall in 1605. He was soon occasionally employed by the court itself -- already in 1606 in conjunction with Inigo Jones, as responsible for the "painting and carpentry" -- and thus speedily showed himself master in a species of composition for which, more than any other English poet before Milton, he secured an enduring place in the national poetic literature. Personally, no doubt, he derived considerable material benefit from the new fashion -- more especially if his statement to Drummond was anything like correct, that out of his plays (which may be presumed to mean his original plays) he had never gained a couple of hundred pounds.

Good humor seems to have come back with good fortune. Joint employment *In The King's Entertainment* (1604) had reconciled him with Dekker; and with Marston also, who in 1604 dedicated to him his *Malcontent*, he was again on pleasant terms. When, therefore, in 1604 Marston and Chapman (who, Jonson told Drummond, was loved of him, and whom he had probably honored as "Virgil" in *The Poetaster*, and who has, though on doubtful grounds, been supposed to have collaborated in the original *Sejanus*) produced the excellent comedy of *Eastward Ho*, it appears to have contained some contributions by Jonson. At all events, when the authors were arrested on account of one or more passages in the play which were deemed insulting to the Scots, he "voluntarily imprisoned himself" with them. They were soon released, and a banquet at his expense, attended by Camden and Selden, terminated the incident. If Jonson is to be believed, there had been a report that the prisoners were to have their ears and noses cut, and, with reference apparently to this peril, "at the midst of the feast his old mother drank to him, and showed him a paper which she had intended (if the sentence had taken execution) to have mixed in the prison among his drink, which was full of lusty strong poison; and that she was no churl, she told him, she minded first to have drunk of it herself." Strange to say, in 1605 Jonson and Chapman, though the former, as he averred, had so "attempered" his style as to have "given no cause to any good man of grief", were again in prison on account of "a play"; but they appear to have been once more speedily set free, in consequence of a very manly and dignified letter addressed by Jonson to the Earl of Salisbury. The play in question, in which both Chapman and Jonson took part, was likely *Sir Gyles Goosecappe*, and this last imprisonment of the two poets was shortly after the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot. In the mysterious history of the Gunpowder Plot Jonson certainly had some obscure part. On the 7th of November, very soon after the discovery of the conspiracy, the council appears to have sent for him and to have asked him, as a loyal Roman Catholic, to use his good offices in inducing the priests to do something required by the council -- one hardly likes to conjecture it to have been some tampering with the secrets of confession. In any case, the negotiations fell through, because the priests declined to come forth out of their hiding-places to be negotiated with -- greatly to the wrath of Ben Jonson, who declares in a letter to Lord Salisbury that "they are all so enweaved in it that it will make 500 gentlemen less of the religion within this week, if they carry their understanding about them." Jonson himself, however, did not declare his separation from the Church of Rome for five years longer, however much it might have been to his advantage to do so.

His powers as a dramatist were at their height during the earlier half of the reign of James I; and by the year 1616 he had produced nearly all the plays which are worthy of his genius. They include the tragedy of *Catiline* (acted and printed 1611), which achieved only a doubtful success, and the comedies of *Volpone, or the Fox* (acted 1605 and printed in 1607 with a dedication "from my house in the Blackfriars"), *Epicoene, or the Silent Woman* (1609; entered in the Stationers' Register 1610), the *Alchemist* (1610; printed in 1610), *Bartholomew Fair* and *The Devil is an Ass* (acted respectively in 1614 and 1616). During the same period he produced several masques, usually in connection with Inigo Jones, with whom, however, he seems to have quarrelled already in this reign, though it is very doubtful whether the architect is really intended to be ridiculed in *Bartholomew Fair* under the character of Lanthorn Leatherhead. Littlewit, according to Fleay, is Daniel. Among the most attractive of his masques may be mentioned the *Masque of Blackness* (1606), the *Masque of Beauty* (1608), and the *Masque of Queens* (1609), described by Swinburne as "the most splendid of all masques" and as "one of the typically splendid monuments or trophies of English literature." In 1616 a modest pension of 100 marks a year was conferred upon him; and possibly this sign of royal favor may have encouraged him to the publication of the first volume of the folio collected edition of his works (1616), though there are indications that he had contemplated its production, an exceptional task for a playwright of his times to take in hand, as early as 1612.

He had other patrons more bountiful than the Crown, and for a brief space of time (in 1613) had travelled to France as governor (without apparently much moral authority) to the eldest son of Sir Walter Raleigh, then a state prisoner in the Tower, for whose society Jonson may have gained a liking at the Mermaid Tavern in Cheapside, but for whose personal character he, like so many of his contemporaries, seems to have had but small esteem. By the year 1616 Jonson seems to have made up his mind to cease writing for the stage, where neither his success nor his profits had equalled his merits and expectations. He continued to produce masques and entertainments when called upon; but he was attracted by many other literary pursuits, and had already accomplished enough to furnish plentiful materials for retrospective discourse over pipe or cup. He was already entitled to lord it at the Mermaid, where his quick antagonist in earlier wit-combats (if Fuller's famous description be authentic) no longer appeared even on a visit from his comfortable retreat at Stratford. That on the other hand Ben carried his wicked town habits into Warwickshire, and there, together with Drayton, made Shakespeare drink so hard with them as to bring upon himself the fatal fever which ended his days, is a scandal with which we may fairly refuse to load Jonson's memory. That he had a share in the preparing for the press of the first folio of Shakespeare, or in the composition of its preface, is of course a mere conjecture.

It was in the year 1618 that, like Samuel Johnson a century and a half afterwards, Ben resolved to have a real holiday for once, and about midsummer started for his ancestral country, Scotland. He had (very heroically for a man of his habits) determined to make the journey on foot; and he was speedily followed by John Taylor, the water-poet, who still further handicapped himself by the condition that he would accomplish the pilgrimage without a penny in his pocket. Jonson, who put money in his good friend's purse when he came up with him at Leith, spent more than a year and a half in the hospitable Lowlands, being solemnly elected a burgess of Edinburgh, and on another occasion entertained at a public banquet there. But the best-remembered hospitality which he enjoyed was that of the learned Scottish poet, William Drummond of Hawthornden, to which we owe the so-called *Conversations*. In these famous jottings, the work of no extenuating hand, Jonson lives for us to this day, delivering his censures, terse as they are, in an expansive mood whether of praise or of blame; nor is he at all generously described in the postscript added by his fatigued and at times irritated host as "a great lover and praiser of himself, a contemner and scorner of others." A poetical account of this journey, with all the adventures, was burned with Jonson's library.

After his return to England Jonson appears to have resumed his former course of life. Among his noble patrons and patronesses were the countess of Rutland (Sidney's daughter) and her cousin Lady Wroth; and in 1619 his visits to the country seats of the nobility were varied by a sojourn at Oxford with Richard Corbet, the poet, at Christ Church, on which occasion he took up the master's degree granted to him by the university; whether he actually proceeded to the same degree granted to him at Cambridge seems unknown. He confessed about this time that he was or seemed growing "restive" (lazy), though it was not long before he returned to the occasional composition of masques. The extremely spirited *Gipsies Metamorphosed* (1621) was thrice presented before the king, who was so pleased with it as to grant to the poet the reversion of the office of master of the revels, besides proposing to confer upon him the honor of knighthood. This honor Jonson (hardly in deference to the memory of Sir Petronel Flash) declined; but there was no reason why he should not gratefully accept the increase of his pension in the same year (1621) to £200 -- a temporary increase only, inasmuch as it still stood at 100 marks when afterwards augmented by Charles I.

The close of King James I's reign found the foremost of its poets in anything but a prosperous condition. It would be unjust to hold the Sun, the Dog, the Triple Tun, or the Old Devil with its Apollo club-room, where Ben's supremacy must by this time have become established, responsible for this result; taverns were the clubs of that day, and a man of letters is not considered lost in our own because he haunts a smoking-room in Pall Mall. Disease had weakened the poet's strength, and the burning of his library, as his *Execration upon Vulcan* sufficiently shows, must have been no mere transitory trouble to a poor poet and scholar. Moreover he cannot but have felt, from the time of the accession of Charles I early in 1625 onwards, that the royal patronage would no longer be due in part to anything like intellectual sympathy. He thus thought it best to recur to the surer way of writing for the stage, and in 1625 produced, with no faint heart, but with a very clear anticipation of the comments which would be made upon the reappearance of the "huge, overgrown play-maker", *The Staple of News*, a comedy excellent in some respects, but little calculated to become popular. It was not printed until 1631. Jonson, whose habit of body was not more conducive than were his ways of life to a healthy old age, had a paralytic stroke in 1626, and a second in 1628. In the latter year, on the death of Middleton, the appointment of city chronologer, with a salary of 100 nobles a year, was bestowed upon him. He appears to have considered the duties of this office as purely ornamental; but in 1631 his salary was suspended until he should have presented some fruits of his labors in his place, or -- as he more succinctly phrased it -- "yesterday the barbarous court of aldermen have withdrawn their chandlerly pension for verjuice and mustard, £33, 6s. 8d." After being in 1628 arrested by mistake on the utterly false charge of having written certain verses in approval of the assassination of Buckingham, he was soon allowed to return to Westminster, where it would appear from a letter of his "son and contiguous neighbor", James Howell, he was living in 1629, and about this time narrowly escaped another conflagration. In the same year (1629) he once more essayed the stage with the comedy of *The New Inn*, which was actually, and on its own merits not unjustly, damned on the first performance. It was printed in 1631, "as it was never acted but most negligently played"; and Jonson defended himself against his critics in his spirited *Ode to Himself*. The epilogue to *The New Inn* having dwelt not without dignity upon the neglect which the poet had experienced at the hands of "king and queen", King Charles immediately sent the unlucky author a gift of £100, and in response to a further appeal increased his standing salary to the same sum, with the addition of an annual tierce of canary -- the poet-laureate's customary royal gift, though this designation of an office, of which Jonson discharged some of what became the ordinary functions, is not mentioned in the warrant dated the 26th of March 1630. In 1634, by the king's desire, Jonson's salary as chronologer to the city was again paid. To his later years belong the comedies, *The Magnetic Lady* (1632) and *The Tale of a Tub* (1633), both printed in 1640, and some masques, none of which met with great success. The patronage of liberal-minded men, such as the earl, afterwards duke, of Newcastle -- by whom he must have been commissioned to write his last two masques *Love's Welcome at Welbeck* (1633) and *Love's Welcome at Bolsover* (1634) -- and Viscount Falkland, was not wanting, and his was hardly an instance in which the fickleness of time and taste could have allowed a literary veteran to end his career in neglect. He was the acknowledged chief of the English world of letters, both at the festive meetings where he ruled the roast among the younger authors whose pride it was to be "sealed of the tribe of Ben", and by the avowal of grave writers, old or young, not one of whom would have ventured to dispute his titular pre-eminence. Nor was he to the last unconscious of the claims upon him which his position brought with it. When, nearly two years after he had lost his surviving son, death came upon the sick old man on the 6th of August 1637, he left behind him an unfinished work of great beauty, the pastoral drama of *The Sad Shepherd* (printed in 1641). For forty years, he said in the prologue, he had feasted the public; at first he could scarce hit its taste, but patience had at last enabled it to identify itself with the working of his pen.

We are so accustomed to think of Ben Jonson presiding, attentive to his own applause, over a circle of younger followers and admirers that we are apt to forget the hard struggle which he had passed through before gaining the crown now universally acknowledged to be his. Howell records, in the year before Ben's death, that a solemn supper at the poet's own house, where the host had almost spoiled the relish of the feast by vilifying others and magnifying himself, "T. Ca." (Thomas Carew) buzzed in the writer's ear "that, though Ben had barrelled up a great deal of knowledge, yet it seemed he had not read the *Ethics*, which, among other precepts of morality, forbid self-commendation." Self-reliance is but too frequently coupled with self-consciousness, and for good and for evil self-confidence was no doubt the most prominent feature in the character of Ben Jonson. Hence the combativeness which involved him in so many quarrels in his earlier days, and which jarred so harshly upon the less militant and in some respects more pedantic nature of Drummond. But his quarrels do not appear to have entered deeply into his soul, or indeed usually to have lasted long. He was too exuberant in his vituperations to be bitter, and too outspoken to be malicious. He loved of all things to be called "honest", and there is every reason to suppose that he deserved the epithet. The old superstition that Jonson was filled with malignant envy of the greatest of his fellow-dramatists, and lost no opportunity of giving expression to it, hardly needs notice. Those who consider that William Shakespeare was beyond criticism may find blasphemy in the saying of Jonson that Shakespeare "wanted art." Occasional jesting allusions to particular plays of Shakespeare may be found in Jonson, among which should hardly be included the sneer at "mouldy" Pericles in his *Ode to Himself*. But these amount to nothing collectively, and to very little individually; and against them have to be set, not only the many pleasant traditions concerning the long intimacy between the pair, but also the lines, prefixed to the first Shakespeare folio, as noble as they are judicious, dedicated by the survivor to "the star of poets", and the adaptation, clearly sympathetic notwithstanding all its buts, "de Shakespeare nostrat." in the *Discoveries*. But if Gifford had rendered no other service to Jonson's fame he must be allowed to have once for all vindicated it from the cruellest aspersion which has ever been cast upon it. That in general Ben Jonson was a man of strong likes and dislikes, and was wont to manifest the latter as vehemently as the former, it would be idle to deny. He was at least impartial in his censures, dealing them out freely to Puritan poets like Wither and (supposing him not to have exaggerated his free-spokenness) to princes of his church like Cardinal du Perron. And, if sensitive to attack, he seems to have been impervious to flattery -- to judge from the candor with which he condemned the foibles even of so enthusiastic an admirer as Beaumont. The personage that he disliked the most, and openly abused in the roundest terms, was unfortunately one with many heads and a tongue to hiss in each -- no other than that "general public" which it was the fundamental mistake of his life to fancy he could "rail into approbation" before he had effectively secured its goodwill. And upon the whole it may be said that the admiration of the few, rather than the favor of the many, has kept green the fame of the most independent among all the masters of an art which, in more senses than one, must please to live.

Jonson's learning and industry, which were alike exceptional, by no means exhausted themselves in furnishing and elaborating the materials of his dramatic works. His enemies sneered at him as a translator -- a title which the preceding generation was inclined to esteem the most honorable in literature. But his classical scholarship shows itself in other directions besides his translations from the Latin poets (the *Ars poetica* in particular), in addition to which he appears to have written a version of Barclay's *Argenis*; it was likewise the basis of his *English Grammar*, of which nothing but the rough draft remains (the manuscript itself having perished in the fire in his library), and in connection with the subject of which he appears to have pursued other linguistic studies (Howell in 1629 was trying to procure him a Welsh grammar). And its effects are very visible in some of the most pleasing of his non-dramatic poems, which often display that combination of polish and simplicity hardly to be reached -- or even to be appreciated -- without some measure of classical training.

Exclusively of the few lyrics in Jonson's dramas (which, with the exception of the stately choruses in *Catiline*, charm, and perhaps may surprise, by their lightness of touch), his nondramatic works are comprised in the following collections. The book of *Epigrams* (published in the first folio of 1616) contained, in the poet's own words, the "ripest of his studies." His notion of an epigram was the ancient, not the restricted modern one -- still less that of the critic (R.C., the author of *The Times' Whistle*) in whose language, according to Jonson, "witty" was "obscene." On the whole, these epigrams excel more in encomiastic than in satiric touches, while the pathos of one or two epitaphs in the collection is of the truest kind. In the lyrics and epistles contained in the *Forest* (also in the first folio), Jonson shows greater variety in the poetic styles adopted by him; but the subject of love, which John Dryden considered conspicuous by its absence in the author's dramas, is similarly eschewed here. The *Underwoods* (not published collectively until the second and surreptitious folio) are a miscellaneous series, comprising, together with a few religious and a few amatory poems, a large number of epigrams, epitaphs, elegies and odes, including both the tributes to Shakespeare and several to royal and other patrons and friends, besides the *Execration upon Vulcan*, and the characteristic ode addressed by the poet to himself. To these pieces in verse should be added the *Discoveries -- Timber, or Discoveries made upon Men and Matters*, avowedly a commonplace book of aphorisms noted by the poet in his daily readings -- thoughts adopted and adapted in more tranquil and perhaps more sober moods than those which gave rise to the outpourings of the *Conversations at Hawthornden*. As to the critical value of these *Conversations* it is far from being only negative; he knew how to admire as well as how to disdain. For these thoughts, though abounding with biographical as well as general interest, Jonson was almost entirely indebted to ancient writers, or (as has been shown by Professor Spingarn and by Percy Simpson) indebted to the humanists of the Renaissance.

The extant dramatic works of Ben Jonson fall into three or, if his fragmentary pastoral drama be considered to stand by itself, into four distinct divisions. The tragedies are only two in number -- *Sejanus his Fall* and *Catiline his Conspiracy*. Of these the earlier, as is worth noting, was produced at Shakespeare's theater, in all probability before the first of Shakespeare's Roman dramas, and still contains a considerable admixture of rhyme in the dialogue. Though perhaps less carefully elaborated in diction than its successor, *Sejanus* is at least equally impressive as a highly wrought dramatic treatment of a complex historic theme. The character of Tiberius adds an element of curious psychological interest on which speculation has never quite exhausted itself and which, in Jonson's day at least, was wanting to the figures of Catiline and his associates. But in both plays the action is powerfully conducted, and the care bestowed by the dramatist upon the great variety of characters introduced cannot, as in some of his comedies, be said to distract the interest of the reader. Both these tragedies are noble works, though the relative popularity of the subject (for conspiracies are in the long run more interesting than camarillas) has perhaps secured the preference to *Catiline*. Yet this play and its predecessor were alike too manifestly intended by their author to court the goodwill of what he calls the "extraordinary" reader. It is difficult to imagine that (with the aid of judicious shortenings) either could altogether miss its effect on the stage; but, while Shakespeare causes us to forget, Jonson seems to wish us to remember, his authorities. The half is often greater than the whole; and Jonson, like all dramatists and, it might be added, all novelists in similar cases, has had to pay the penalty incurred by too obvious a desire to underline the learning of the author.

Perversity -- or would-be originality -- alone could declare Jonson's tragedy preferable to his comedy. Even if the revolution which he created in the comic branch of the drama had been mistaken in its principles or unsatisfactory in its results, it would be clear that the strength of his dramatic genius lay in the power of depicting a great variety of characters, and that in comedy alone he succeeded in finding a wide field for the exercise of this power. There may have been no very original or very profound discovery in the idea which he illustrated in *Every Man in his Humour*, and, as it were, technically elaborated in *Every Man out of his Humour* -- that in many men one quality is observable which so possesses them as to draw the whole of their individualities one way, and that this phenomenon "may be truly said to be a humour." The idea of the master quality or tendency was, as has been well observed, a very considerable one for dramatist or novelist. Nor did Jonson (happily) attempt to work out this idea with any excessive scientific consistency as a comic dramatist. But, by refusing to apply the term "humour" to a mere peculiarity or affectation of manners, and restricting its use to actual or implied differences or distinctions of character, he broadened the whole basis of English comedy after his fashion, as Molière at a later date, keeping in closer touch with the common experience of human life, with a lighter hand broadened the basis of French and of modern Western comedy at large. It does not of course follow that Jonson's disciples, the Bromes and the Cartwrights, always adequately reproduced the master's conception of "humorous" comedy. Jonson's wide and various reading helped him to diversify the application of his theory, while perhaps at times it led him into too remote illustrations of it. Still, Captain Bobadil and Captain Tucca, Macilente and Fungoso, Volpone and Mosca, and a goodly number of other characters impress themselves permanently upon the memory of those whose attention they have as a matter of course commanded. It is a very futile criticism to condemn Jonson's characters as a mere series of types of general ideas; on the other hand, it is a very sound criticism to object, with Barry Cornwall, to the "multitude of characters who throw no light upon the story, and lend no interest to it, occupying space that had better have been bestowed upon the principal agents of the plot."

In the construction of plots, as in most other respects, Jonson's at once conscientious and vigorous mind led him in the direction of originality; he depended to a far less degree than the greater part of his contemporaries (Shakespeare with the rest) upon borrowed plots. But either his inventive character was occasionally at fault in this respect, or his devotion to his characters often diverted his attention from a brisk conduct of his plot. Barry Cornwall has directed attention to the essential likeness in the plot of two of Jonson's best comedies, *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*; and another critic, W. Bodham Donne, has dwelt on the difficulty which, in *The Poetaster* and elsewhere, Ben Jonson seems to experience in sustaining the promise of his actions. *The Poetaster* is, however, a play *sui generis*, in which the real business can hardly be said to begin until the last act.

Dryden, when criticizing Ben Jonson's comedies, thought fit, while allowing the old master humor and incontestable "pleasantness", to deny him wit and those ornaments thereof which Quintilian reckons up under the terms *urbana*, *salsa*, *faceta* and so forth. Such wit as Dryden has in view is the mere outward fashion or style of the day, the euphuism or "sheerwit" or *chic* which is the creed of Fastidious Brisks and of their astute purveyors at any given moment. In this Ben Jonson was no doubt defective; but it would be an error to suppose him, as a comic dramatist, to have maintained towards the world around him the attitude of a philosopher, careless of mere transient externalisms. It is said that the scene of his *Every Man in his Humour* was originally laid near Florence; and his *Volpone*, which is perhaps the darkest social picture ever drawn by him, plays at Venice. Neither locality was ill-chosen, but the real atmosphere of his comedies is that of the native surroundings amidst which they were produced; and Ben Jonson's times live for us in his men and women, his country gulls and town gulls, his alchemists and exorcists, his "skeldring"[[3]](#footnote-3) captains and whining Puritans, and the whole ragamuffin rout of his *Bartholomew Fair*, the comedy *par excellence* of Elizabethan low life. After he had described the pastimes, fashionable and unfashionable, of his age, its feeble superstitions and its flaunting naughtinesses, its vaporing affectations and its lying effronteries, with an odour as of "divine tabacco" pervading the whole, little might seem to be left to describe for his "sons" and successors. Enough, however, remained; only that his followers speedily again threw manners and "humours" into an undistinguishable medley.

The gift which both in his art and in his life Jonson lacked was that of exercising the influence or creating the effects which he wished to exercise or create without the appearance of consciousness. Concealment never crept over his efforts, and he scorned insinuation. Instead of this, influenced no doubt by the example of the free relations between author and public permitted by Attic comedy, he resorted again and again, from *Every Man out of his Humour* to *The Magnetic Lady*, to inductions and commentatory intermezzos and appendices, which, though occasionally effective by the excellence of their execution, are to be regretted as introducing into his dramas an exotic and often vexatious element. A man of letters to the very core, he never quite understood that there is and ought to be a wide difference of methods between the world of letters and the world in the theater.

The richness and versatility of Jonson's genius will never be fully appreciated by those who fail to acquaint themselves with what is preserved to us of his "masques" and cognate entertainments. He was conscious enough of his success in this direction -- "next himself", he said, "only Fletcher and Chapman could write a masque." He introduced, or at least established, the ingenious innovation of the anti-masque, which Schlegel has described, as a species of "parody added by the poet to his device, and usually prefixed to the serious entry", and which accordingly supplies a grotesque antidote to the often extravagantly imaginative main conception. Jonson's learning, creative power and humorous ingenuity -- combined, it should not be forgotten, with a genuine lyrical gift -- all found abundant opportunities for displaying themselves in these productions. Though a growth of foreign origin, the masque was by him thoroughly domesticated in the high places of English literature. He lived long enough to see the species produce its poetic masterpiece in *Comus[[4]](#footnote-4)*.

*The Sad Shepherd*, of which Jonson left behind him three acts and a prologue, is distinguished among English pastoral dramas by its freshness of tone; it breathes something of the spirit of the greenwood, and is not unnatural even in its supernatural element. While this piece, with its charming love scenes between Robin Hood and Maid Marion, remains a fragment, another pastoral by Jonson, the *May Lord*, has been lost, and a third, of which Loch Lomond was intended to be the scene, probably remained unwritten.

Though Ben Jonson never altogether recognized the truth of the maxim that the dramatic art has properly speaking no didactic purpose, his long and laborious life was not wasted upon a barren endeavor. In tragedy he added two works of uncommon merit to our dramatic literature. In comedy his aim was higher, his effort more sustained, and his success more solid than were those of any of his fellows. In the subsidiary and hybrid species of the masque, he helped to open a new and attractive though undoubtedly devious path in the field of dramatic literature. His intellectual endowments surpassed those of most of the great English dramatists in richness and breadth; and in energy of application he probably left them all behind. Inferior to more than one of his fellow dramatists in the power of imaginative sympathy, he was first among the Elizabethans in the power of observation; and there is point in Barrett Wendell's paradox, that as a dramatist he was not really a poet but a painter. Yet it is less by these gifts, or even by his unexcelled capacity for hard work, than by the true ring of manliness that he will always remain distinguished among his peers.

Jonson was buried on the north side of the nave in Westminster Abbey, and the inscription, "O Rare Ben Jonson", was cut in the slab over his grave. In the beginning of the 18th century a portrait bust was put up to his memory in the Poets' Corner by Harley, earl of Oxford. Of Honthorst's portrait of Jonson at Knole Park there is a copy in the National Portrait Gallery; another was engraved by W. Marshall for the 1640 edition of his *Poems*.

**Conclusion**

**Ben Jonson and his role in English literature**

Known primarily as a writer of comedies such as *Every Man in His Humor* (1598) and *Every Man out of His Humor* (1599) in the reign of Elizabeth, Ben Jonson's (1572-1637) most interesting plays were performed during the reign (called the Jacobean period) of her successor, King James I. *Volpone* (1606) and *The Alchemist* (1610) stand today as Jonson's most often produced plays. Both are broad comedies: *Volpone* plays on the foxiness of a dying man who is anxious to see which of his heirs is worthy, and *The Alchemist* is a satire on the wiliness of con men who pretend to know how to transmute base metal into gold. All of these plays were highly regarded in Jacobean times. In addition to his comedies, Jonson's tragedies *Sejanus* (1603) and *Catiline* (1611) earned him the description of "best in tragedy" from a contemporary who maintained a diary devoted to his experiences in the theater. [[5]](#footnote-5)

Jonson led an exciting life. Born after his father died, he was placed in the Westminster School at the expense of its master, William Camden, author of the famous survey *Britannia*. There Jonson learned Latin and Greek, but he himself said that instead of attending a university, he practiced his trade. Because Jonson's stepfather was a bricklayer, it has been assumed that Jonson learned that trade. He eventually grew tired of bricklaying and managed to get a job as an actor. In 1598, while a member of Philip Henslowe's theater, he killed a fellow actor in a brawl. He claimed self-defense and was granted "benefit of clergy," which was accorded those who could read and translate a Latin passage, but as punishment he carried a brand on his thumb from Tyburn, the place of execution and punishment, for the rest of his life.

For Jonson the stage was a way of making a living. He aspired to be a pure poet and was accorded great honor in his lifetime by other poets. But he could not, even with the patronage of important noblemen, eke out a sufficient living writing only poetry. Jonson was imprisoned in Elizabeth's reign for writing an offensive play, *the Isle of Dogs* (1597), and in the early years of King James's reign, which began on March 24, 1603, play writing continued to be dangerous. Toward the end of 1606, Jonson teamed with George Chapman and William Marston to write *Eastward Ho!*, a comedy that ridiculed the Scots (James I was a Scot). Jonson and Chapman were imprisoned, but Jonson eventually contacted enough important people to secure his release, probably in October, claiming that the few offensive lines had been written by Marston, who had fled London to avoid prison. Then in November the great Gunpowder Plot—remembered today with bonfires on November 5, Guy Fawkes Day—cast a dangerous shadow over him. Led by the Catholic conspirator Guy Fawkes, the Gunpowder Plot was a plan to kill the king, his advisers, and all members of the hierarchy of the Church and Parliament. Guy Fawkes's use of the pseudonym John Johnson, together with Jonson's conversion to Catholicism, may have resulted in the playwright's becoming a suspect. Luckily, he was well-known in James's court and was able to demonstrate his loyalty and innocence. [[6]](#footnote-6)

Jonson won considerable acclaim as a writer in the court of James I and Queen Anne. He composed entertainments and masques designed to be associated with important state occasions. The masque was a dramatic form that enjoyed great popularity for close to a century and a half. It was restricted to the entertainment and participation of royalty and courtiers. As its name implies, characters were sometimes masked to represent abstract ideas such as Blackness or Beauty or mythic characters such as Albion, an allegory for England itself.

In the group of playwrights immediately surrounding Shakespeare,[[7]](#footnote-7) who with him were perhaps accustomed to gather in the Mermaid Tavern, were Ben Jonson, Webster, Ford, Beaumont and Fletcher, Chapman, Marston, and Dekker. Among these Jonson was easily the first, both in the quality of his genius and the amount of his work. He was a man of enormous learning, poet laureate, a soldier in Flanders, an actor, and hack writer for Henslowe. He appeared first as a playwright in the late years of the sixteenth century, at the moment when Shakespeare and the romantic comedies were at the height of their popularity. To some extent he was obliged to conform to the prevailing taste; but his natural inclination was toward the classic and regular style rather than toward the romantic; and his "humour" was satirical rather than sentimental.

Jonson's plays fall roughly into three groups: the realistic comedies, the tragedies, and the masques. As a contribution to drama the realistic comedies are most important. Even in his 'prentice work, the two plays *The Case is Altered* and *The Tale of a Tub*, it is evident that he was influenced more by classic models than by contemporary fashion. *The Case Is Altered* is based upon two plays of Plautus and the old familiar theme of the abduction of infants. The action is completed in one place and covers but a single day. Jonson's importance, however, is not owing to this return to the classical form, but to his keenness in portraying contemporaneous types. He took from the Plautine plays some of the most successful stock characters such as Miles Gloriosus (whom he named Captain Bobadil), the spendthrift son, the jealous husband, and so transformed them that they stand forth revived and recreated, as true comic figures belonging to Elizabethan London.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The play *Every Man in His Humour* (1598) inaugurated the school of realistic comedy, unlike anything which had hitherto appeared on the English stage. It deals not with the passions, but with the follies, the "humours" of mankind. The scene is laid in London, and different sorts of city characters are pictured to the life. The play was the sensation of the hour, and was enacted before the queen by the company to which Shakespeare belonged, and in which he at one time acted.

Jonson was brilliant, but apparently neither genial nor lovable -- indeed he had the reputation of being pompous and arrogant. Though manly and honorable, he seems to have been lacking in sympathy. As a dramatist, he was resourceful in the creation of character and in the invention of comic situations. While for the most part he confined himself to laughing at the more obvious, surface absurdities of society, yet his wit was so keen and his humor so robust as to make a lasting impression upon English drama. He influenced nearly all the writers of the seventeenth century, and his peculiar type of play has persisted on the English speaking stage to the present time.

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