



VOLPONE AND OTHER PLAYS

BEN JONSON was born in 1572, the posthumous son of a minister, and thanks to an unknown patron was educated at Westminster School. After this he was for a brief time apprenticed to his stepfather as a bricklayer. He served as a soldier in the Low Countries and married sometime between 1592 and 1595. In 1597 he began to work for Henslowe's company as actor, player and playwright and during the following two years two groundbreaking comedies, *Every Man in his Humour* and *Every Man out of his Humour*, were produced. These were followed by *Cynthia's Revels* (1600) and *The Poetaster* (1601). Jonson's great run of comedies consists of *Volpone* (1606), *Epicoene, or the Silent Woman* (1609), *The Alchemist* (1610) and *Bartholomew Fair* (1614). In addition to his comic writing Jonson also produced two powerful Roman tragedies, *Sejanus, his Fall* (1603) and *Catiline, his Conspiracy* (1611). After 1611 Jonson abandoned the public theatre for a decade, concentrating his efforts entirely on the court masques, a form of entertainment that reached its highest elaboration in his hands, and his sporadic returns to comic drama in the Caroline period met with less popular success than his Jacobean masterpieces. In 1616 he was granted a royal pension and made, in effect, Poet Laureate. His latter years were unhappy, though. Under Charles I he lost favour and was replaced as masque-writer after quarrelling with Inigo Jones, the masque-designer. He also suffered from paralysis and was unable to publish the second volume of his *Workes*. Ben Jonson died on 6 August 1637.

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BEN JONSON

Volpone and Other Plays

Edited with an Introduction and Notes by

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PENGUIN BOOKS

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Group (USA), Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Books Australia Ltd, 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia

Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 10 Alcorn Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4V 3B2

Penguin Books India (P) Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India

Penguin Books (NZ) Ltd, Cnr Rosedale and Airborne Roads, Albany, Auckland, New Zealand

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

www.penguin.com

This collection published in the Penguin English Library 1966

Reprinted in Penguin Classics 1985 as *Three Comedies*

Reprinted under present title 2004

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INTRODUCTION

I

... Then to the well-trod stage anon,
If Jonson's learnèd sock be on,
Or sweetest Shakespeare, Fancy's child,
Warble his native wood-notes wild.

THIS, I suppose, is the context in which many of us as school-children first came upon the mere name of Ben Jonson. It occurs in John Milton's *L' Allegro*, in that passage where the poet, talking of the nocturnal pleasures of city life, enthuses over the comic theatre. It is ironic that the second line, which contains Milton's tribute to the master of English comedy, should have become a puzzling allusion which young minds are required to explain at O-level. Yet Jonson belongs with those writers whom one is often expected to know about rather than to have read.

I was fortunate in that I next came upon Jonson in the theatre, when Donald Wolfit was playing *Volpone* and relishing that archpredator's sardonic villainies. That Jonson could still be a great entertainer came as a revelation. He belongs on the boards, as Milton indeed was suggesting in the expression 'well-trod stage', but the doubly allusive lines from *L' Allegro* seem, from the way in which they demand foot-noting, sadly symbolic of Jonson's reputation among readers today. The 'learnèd socks' are the slippers Greek and Roman actors wore in their comedies; in these lines Jonson, the classically erudite writer of comedy, is epitomized in an allusion from the theatre of the Ancients by a poet of even greater classical erudition. Ben Jonson's Milton expected his readers to recognize also a graceful compliment to Ben Jonson, for in the author's own poem in Shakespeare's memory prefaced to the First Folio, 'sock' is similarly used:

And though thou hadst small Latin and less Greek,
From thence to honour thee I would not seek
For names; but call forth thund' ring Aeschylus.
Euripides, and Sophocles to us....
Or, when thy socks were on,

Leave thee alone, for the comparison

Of all that insolent Greece or haughty Rome

Sent forth, or since did from their ashes come.

In Milton's four lines we seem to find several aspects of Jonson which are daunting to the general reader of books – his classicism, his great learning, his tendency (like Milton with his 'learnèd sock') to need explanatory notes, and, of course, his complete contrast to William Shakespeare. Milton is, in fact, praising Jonson, placing him first, and being, if anything, condescending about Shakespeare. But that is not how the lines strike us at first reading today, for we put a higher value than Milton did on spontaneity, and are quick to sniff pedantry in a 'classical' writer. There is something daunting about Jonson's present-day reputation; and anyone introducing a volume of his plays has to begin by stressing what ought to be obvious – that his three best comedies are still very funny, that they make splendid reading, and that they are vivid, lucid, and marvellouslyactable stage-plays.

Critics have already dwelt, a shade lugubriously, on this daunting aspect of Jonson's work. In 1919 T. S. Eliot wrote:

The reputation of Jonson has been of the most deadly kind that can be compelled upon the memory of a great poet. To be universally accepted; to be damned by the praise that quenches all desire to read the book; to be afflicted by the imputation of the virtues which excite the least pleasure; and to be read only by historians and antiquaries – this is the most perfect conspiracy of approval.¹

In 1938 Professor Harry Levin continued in a similar vein:

Ben Jonson's position, three hundred years after his death, is more than secure; it might almost be called impregnable. He is still the greatest unread English author.... Jonson has always had more attention from antiquarians than from critics, and has too often served as a cadaver over which to read a lecture on the lore of language and custom.²

And in 1948 Edmund Wilson commented, just as bleakly:

... among a thousand people, say, who have some knowledge and love of Shakespeare, and even some taste for Webster and Marlowe, I doubt whether you could find half a dozen who have any enthusiasm for Jonson or who have seriously read his plays. T. S. Eliot, admitting the long neglect into which Ben Jonson's work had fallen, put up... a strong plea for Jonson

as an artist, and thus made a respect for this poet *de rigueur* in literary circles. But one impression is that what people have read has been, not Jonson, but Eliot's essay.¹

Readers are still put off by talk of Jonson's monumental learning and by the constant artificial twinning, as in Milton's lines, of a Jonson laboriously theoretical and a Shakespeare effortlessly inspired. Many critical discussions of Jonsonian comedy are bedevilled by the fact that writers on Shakespeare use Jonson as the convenient representative writer of 'classical comedy, in order to contrast that *genre* with the richer Shakespearean comedy exemplified by *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, or *The Tempest*. Jonson's two great comedies, *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*, are not examples of a kind of play which is inherently inferior to Shakespearean comedy. They are comic masterpieces in their own right, but in a different tradition. Jonson's best work for the theatre operates within narrow limits; it does not have the diversity of Shakespeare's comedies, histories, and tragedies. The three plays reprinted here are the best three – though a case could be made for displacing *Bartholomew Fair* with *The Silent Woman* – and they are plays of the same broad, satiric scope. This makes it necessary, in the sections on individual plays, to emphasize their differences as well as their similarities, as a step towards evaluating them critically.

Jonson's biography and the critical theories behind his plays are of secondary importance despite the facts that Jonson's was a life of compelling interest to the literary historian and that he was hugely respected in his own day as a prescriptive literary theorist. But some knowledge of the details of Jonson's life, of his theories about literary composition and about what constituted literary excellence, and of his artistic assumptions, helps to put the three comedies in perspective for modern readers and playgoers.

II

Jonson was a great and colourful character. He probably killed a man in a hand-to-hand fight while soldiering in the Low Countries, and he certainly killed the actor Gabriel Spencer in a duel. He was imprisoned several times. He once worked as a bricklayer. He was bonhomous, opinionated, and highly prized drinking companion in literary London, and the William Hickeys of this world might write him down as an *habitué* of the Mermaid Tavern, the Sun, the Dog, the Triple Tun, and the Apollo Room upstairs above the Old Devil. His output – as printed in his own Folio *Workes* or in the eleven stout, splendid, Oxonian volumes

edited and annotated by C. H. Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson – demonstrate, however, that the greater part of his crowded life must have been spent in what W. B. Yeats once called ‘the sedentary toil of creative art’. It is as a writer that he is of interest to us today, not as a personality.

Ben Jonson was born, the posthumous son of a minister, in 1572, and, thanks to an unknown patron, he was educated at one of the great schools of the day, Westminster, where the headmaster was the scholar and antiquarian, William Camden. At a time when he might have expected to go up to Cambridge or Oxford, he was apprenticed, briefly and humiliatingly, to his stepfather as a bricklayer. He served as a soldier in the Low Countries, married, and was for a time an actor. From around 1597 he wrote plays for Philip Henslowe, working on such get-penny entertainments as *Hot Anger Soon Cold* and *Richard Crookback*, as well as on the superb additions to the ever-popular melodrama *The Spanish Tragedy*. His first truly Jonsonian comedies were *Everyman in his Humour*, in which William Shakespeare acted in 1598, and *Everyman out of his Humour*; both are ‘comedies of humours’, in which each character is a type dominated by a ruling passion or obsession. To the complicated literary feud known as ‘The War of the Theatres’ Jonson contributed *Poetaster* and he was himself attacked in *Satiromastix, or The Untrussing of the Humorous Poet*. Soon after, however, he collaborated with Chapman and one of his attackers, Marston, on a racy London comedy, *Eastward Ho!*, which contained a joke (‘I ken the man weel. He’s ane of my thirty pound knights’) about King James’s Scots accent and his mercenary creation of knights. The collaborators were imprisoned. Yet already Jonson had won favour at Court and had created his first royal masque, *The Masque of Blackness*. He became the greatest English writer and contriver of these splendid Renaissance entertainments, producing thirty-three for King James, and inventing the grotesque comic interlude, the anti-masque. In most of these he collaborated with the famous architect and stage-designer, Inigo Jones, whose spectacular scenes and machines were later to eclipse Jonson’s poetry and songs.

Jonson’s great run of comedies consists of *Volpone* (1606), *The Silent Woman* (1609), *The Alchemist* (1610), written, like Shakespeare’s plays, for the King’s Men, and *Bartholomew Fair* (1614). His two Roman tragedies, correct by classical standards, *Sejanus, his Fall* (1603) and *Catiline, his Conspiracy* (1611) were failures in the theatre, but Professor G. E. Bentley’s researches have shown that *Catiline* was the most respected play of the seventeenth century; the tragedy educated people were expected to admire.¹ Jonson’s later plays, which Dryden

termed 'dotages', show a sad falling-off.

In 1616 Jonson published in folio *The Workes of Beniamin Jonson*, a daring act which had important reverberations. The *Workes* included not only epistles, satires, and epigrams (respectable literary *genres*) but also masques and nine play-scripts, edited as meticulously as if they had been philosophical treatises or a Spenserian epic. None of the early hack-work for Henslowe was printed, but the use of the title *Workes* for mere stage-plays was greeted with scorn and derision. Had Jonson not put his plays before the public in this collected edition, the actors Heming and Condell might never have undertaken the great posthumous collection of plays, many not previously printed, by William Shakespeare, the First Folio of 1623. The gossip John Aubrey records, 'Ben Jonson was never a good Actor, but an excellent Instructor' which suggests that he insisted on supervising rehearsals of his own plays – something keeping with his finicky and exacting temperament and his (justifiable) pride in his work.

In the year his *Workes* were published in Folio, Jonson was granted a royal pension and made, in effect, Poet Laureate. King James wanted to make him a knight. He was uniquely honoured among Jacobean writers: Cambridge and Oxford gave him honorary degrees, and when he walked to Edinburgh in 1618 he was made an honorary burgess and entertained at a civic banquet costing, £220 6s. 4d., Scots – the Scots pound being worth 1s. 8d. He made a long stay with William Drummond of Hawthornden, the Scots poet, who jotted down his table-talk, which was pithy, opinionated, and revealing. His last years in London were unhappy. His library was burned. He became paralysed, and was unable to get out the second volume of his *Workes*. Under King Charles, James's Laureate did not find favour: he quarrelled with Inigo Jones and was replaced as masque-writer at Court by Aurelia Townshend. He died on 6 August 1637, and his burial at Westminster Abbey was attended by 'all or the greatest part of the nobility and gentry then in town'. C. H. Herford and Percy Simpson in their Oxford edition end the biography thus:

Neglected as his later years had been, the passing of Ben was, for the entire world of letters, the passing of its king – a king who had perhaps ceased to govern, but who still reigned.¹

In 1638 appeared a collection of thirty-three poems, *Jonsonus Virbius, or The Memory of Ben Jonson Revived By The Friends of the Muses*. The projected memorial to him in the Abbey never materialized. Instead, a square of marble was inscribed, at a cost (according to Aubrey) of eighteen-pence: 'O Rare Ben Jonson.'

Jonson was, in a way that Shakespeare never was, a celebrity and a man of letters. He was a poet, a writer of court-masques, a literary theorist, a grammarian, a dramatist, and a pundit. His theories about composition and rhetoric are easily accessible in *Timber*, *Discoveries*, posthumously pieced together from Jonson's commonplace book, or even from lecture-notes, by Sir Kenelm Digby. There is nothing there specifically about the writing of comedies, but Jonson's ideas on this subject would have matched Sir Philip Sidney's definition:

Comedy is an imitation of the common errors of our life, which he presenteth in the most ridiculous and scornful sort that may be; so as it is impossible that any beholder can be content to be such a one.

The Prologue to *Every Man in his Humour* tells of the author's ambition to offer models of comedy-writing:

He rather prays, you will be pleased to see
One such, today, as other plays should be.

Jonson promises:

... deeds and language, such as men do use,
And persons, such as Comedy would choose,
When she would show an image of the times,
And sport with human follies, not with crimes.

This, like the epistle-dedicatory of *Volpone*, aligns him with the satiric tradition of comedy where comedy is didactic and offers moral correction. It points also to that classical notion of comedy as concerned, not like tragedy with kings and princes but with people placed low on the social scale, people of the city and the streets. Professor Nevill Coghill has usefully demonstrated that two traditions of comedy existed in Elizabethan times, with different antecedents, both stemming from theoretical reversals of Aristotle's notions of tragedy. Romantic Comedy begins with wretchedness and the threat of danger but ends happily. Satiric Comedy teaches by exposing the errors of city folk. Shakespeare and Jonson, Professor Coghill argues, exemplify the two comic forms:

Compared with the comedies of Shakespeare, those of Ben Jonson are no laughing matter. A harsh ethic in them yokes punishment with derision; foibles are persecuted and vices flayed.

the very simpletons are savaged for being what they are. The population... [of] his comedies... is a congeries of cits, parvenus, mountebanks, cozeners, dupes, braggarts, bullies and bitches. No one loves anyone...

In Shakespeare things are different. Princes and dukes, lords and ladies, jostle with merchants, weavers, joiners, country sluts, friendly rogues, schoolmasters, and village policemen, hardly one of whom is incapable of a generous impulse.¹

And of the two traditions Professor Coghill remarks:

Faced by a choice in such matters, a writer is wise if he follows his own temperament. Ben Jonson knotted his cat-o'-nine-tails. Shakespeare reached for his Chaucer.¹

The excellencies and the limitations of Jonson's comedies are closely related to his chosen *genre*. It is a mistake to regard him as *the* exemplar of 'classical' comic dramaturgy. As Professor Levin reminds us 'Jonson is commonly conceived as a man who wrote comedies because he had a theory about why comedies ought to be written.'² In our own day the writer with a sound theoretical basis for his art is somehow suspect, and to brand Jonson as a comic theorist gives his plays a forbidding, pedantic image. The neoclassical views on wide reading, knowledge of rhetoric, constant practice of one's own style, and imitation of past masters which Jonson set down and refined upon in *Discoveries* have a pragmatic and very English bent, and remind us of the *obiter dicta* preserved by William Drummond. While the reader should not too readily assume that Jonson's dramatic practice squared rigidly with his critical precepts, it still seems both appropriate and meaningful to say that Jonson's greatest comedies, *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*, display 'classical' virtues of lucidity and meticulous construction.

The quality of a Jonsonian comedy, however, lies not only in its construction and in its presentation of character as obsession, but also in its language, which often has a positive *nourishing* quality; it has the 'feel' of the life of his time. In fact, Jonson's evocation of contemporary London low-life is at times so dense, so detailed that for a modern reader it is at first confusing; *Volpone*, set in Venice, is as a result the most immediately accessible of his comedies.

The master-theme in Jonson's satirical comedies is human folly, particularly that obsessive human greed which betrays fools into the hands of expert and opportunist manipulators. The

action always culminates in exposure and often in punishment. The comedy is harsh, single-minded, and inhospitable to sentiment, pathos, and irrelevance. In the end Jonsonian comedy is more limited than Shakespeare's great succession of comedies, but the *genre* is pure. Imitation of past masters and the observance of rules helped Jonson to write well; his own acute observation, moral concern, and mastery of words made him a great comic dramatist. Later, imitation of their master guided 'the tribe of Ben' to write less badly, and made Jonson the most celebrated father-figure in English literature.

III

Volpone is Jonson's greatest and most intense comedy. It is a savage and sardonic satire on human greed and rapacity, but the brilliance of the design and the execution, together with the comments of critics primarily concerned with the literary qualities of the play, should not prevent us from recognizing its perennial vitality as a piece of theatre.

Jonson presents both his characters and their backgrounds with deliberate precision. The people of the play are, through their-names, invested with animal symbolism (Wolf, Flial, Vulture, Raven, and Crow), and linked with the creatures of medieval *fabliaux*, with Reynard the Fox and his victims. But where animals behaving like human beings, whether in the *Fables* of Robert Henryson or in the cartoons of Walt Disney, have the charm and fantasy of creatures viewed from a novel perspective, men behaving like animals and predatory birds are seen to be debased and degenerate. Nor is it by chance that these people are Venetians. Venice, already familiar on the Elizabethan stage as the city of Shakespeare's usurer, Shylock, was famed as the most affluent, acquisitive, glittering, and corrupt city in Renaissance Europe. In the modern theatre one envisages for this play an opulence of production and *décors* as peculiarly necessary to emphasize the preoccupation with affluence and acquisitiveness which the play exposes.

Several literary critics, approaching the opening scenes of *Volpone*, have pointed to the thorough reversal of traditional religious and moral values in the play, and demonstrated how the language and imagery reinforce this total reversal. The play opens with a literal convention, with a character waking to greet the dawn:

Good morning to the day; and next, my gold!
Open the shrine, that I may see my saint!

And, as Mosca draws a curtain, to disclose the treasures heaped up behind, Volpone's speech becomes a perverted act of worship:

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...

Volpone here uses an image of the earth's potential richness and fertility as it awaits the life quickening sun in spring to describe his own expectant state; already within these lines, gold has eclipsed the sun, an idea that is made more explicit a moment later with his apostrophe:

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.

Here the reversal of values and the perverse misappropriation of traditional language ('adoration', 'relic', 'sacred', 'blessèd') become complete, and the myth that gold is indeed child of Sol, the sun, associates Volpone with alchemists and their pursuit of the Philosopher's Stone. The dehumanizing and debasing aspects of Volpone's worship of gold are apparent in the lines where the normal, happy lives of others are contemptuously dismissed. And at the end of the first act, Mosca clinches his seductive description of Celia by comparing her beauty, finally, not with living things but with gold itself. Throughout *Volpone*, religious and erotic language and imagery are perverted and debased, expressing (as their very names do) the inner corruption and animality of the main characters. Jonson also uses language and imagery in such a way that we of the audience are led to make our own moral judgement. Volpone's speeches are often memorably beautiful, but the poetry is never purely ornamental. Thus although, in his more splendid passages, Volpone's energy, intelligence, and thrust may seem to link him in our minds with Dr Faustus and Tamburlaine the Great, the Marlovian over-reachers, we see that he has none of their heroic aspirations. Volpone's habitual disguise as an old man sick unto death, his assumed diseases and senility, ironically point to his own inner sickness; his energy and intelligence shine out in the early scenes of the play principally in contrast to the drab and joyless self-interest and miserliness of his dupes, Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino. He gets more pleasure from manipulating them, and

from watching them squirm, than from anything their gold, diamonds, and pearls enable him to do. Volpone's function in these scenes is almost judicial:

What a rare punishment
Is avarice to itself!

While analysis of the poetry, the imagery, the larger metaphor of animal names, and the like helps to direct and control our moral and emotional responses to *Volpone*, such a critical approach tends to ignore the vitality of the play as a piece of theatre, and literary commentators have insufficiently stressed the superb *theatricalism* of Jonson's great comedy, which stems in part from Volpone's self-congratulatory acting throughout the play. He is a consummate actor, delighting in impersonation and in the details of make-up and costume; our his virtuosity depend the early scenes of the play. Despite Jonson's paucity of stage directions, it is clear that Volpone's huge bed should dominate the stage. At the very beginning of the play he is discovered there, awakening. Later he lies in bed, receiving the tributes from his 'clients', shamming sickness and senility, and all the while critically eyeing and evaluating their presents and making sardonic comments *sotto voce* to Mosca. There are wonderful opportunities here for by-play by the actor playing Volpone; in Sir Donald Wolfitt's performance he 'leered through the curtains and twiddled his toes under the bedclothes for sheer enjoyment as the gifts kept coming in'.¹ Similarly, the scene in which Volpone disguises himself as the Mountebank and harangues the crowd provides Volpone (and the actor playing him) with unlimited opportunities. Later, the bed is again the main stage-furniture in the scene in which Corvino eagerly leads his wife to the bedside of the sick Volpone to prostitute her to his potential benefactor. This is the central scene of the play, and it is a great moment in the theatre when, as Celia droops by the bed, Volpone throws off the furs, the caps, the make-up of the senile invalid, and leaps from the bed to stand before her as a Renaissance gallant, glorying in his potency:

Nay, fly me not,
Nor let thy false imagination
That I was bed-rid, make thee think I am so:
Thou shalt not find it. I am, now, as fresh,
As hot, as high, and in as jovial plight
As when, in that so celebrated scene,
At recitation of our comedy,

For entertainment of the great Valois,

I acted young Antinous, and attracted
The eyes and ears of all the ladies present,
T' admire each graceful gesture, note, and footing.

Typically, Volpone here recalls his past triumph as an actor, and the sex-appeal he had for the ladies of the Court. Typically, too, he links himself, in the pun on 'jovial', with Jove, who metamorphosed himself for so many erotic adventures with earthly maidens. And in the sonnet which originates in Catullus, Volpone presses Celia with the argument, insidious to traditional moralists, that Time is passing, that the only sin is to be found out, and that they are superior beings:

Cannot *we* delude the eyes
Of a few poor household spies?...
To be taken, to be seen,
These have crimes accounted been.

His dazzling speech beginning 'Why droops my Celia?' is a speech of temptation. Running through it there is an unchallenged assumption that everyone has a price ('A diamond would have bought Lollia Paulina'). And when, in the next speech, Volpone depicts their future life together, the sensuality becomes more blatant:

Our drink shall be preparèd gold and amber,
Which we will take until my roof whirl round
With the vertigo; and my dwarf shall dance,
My eunuch sing, my fool make up the antic.
Whilst we, in changèd shapes, act Ovid's tales,
Thou like Europa now, and I like Jove,
Then I like Mars, and thou like Erycine;
So of the rest, till we have quite run through,
And wearied all the fables of the gods.
Then will I have thee in more modern forms,
Attirèd like some sprightly dame of France...
Or some quick Negro, or cold Russian...

The perversity, the artificial stimulation of passion, reminds us (if Mosca is a truthf

witness) of the real children of Volpone: the dwarf, the eunuch, the hermaphrodite – the three freaks – and:

Bastards,

Some dozen, or more, that he begot on beggars,

Gypsies, and Jews, and black-moors, when he was drunk.

It reminds us, too, of Nano's song, sung while he impersonated the Mountebank's zany, who vainly promised eternal youth and beauty, and the preservation of the life of the senses. Volpone, the eloquent seducer, fails to move Celia. He resorts to rape. Bonario rushes in, at the nick of time, to save Celia; but Jonson in this play is not much interested in human goodness, and the wronged wife and stalwart young man are minor, unrealized figures in the comedy. Coleridge was not alone in expressing disappointment at this: 'Bonario and Celia should have been made in some way or other principals in the plot... If it were possible to lessen the paramountcy of Volpone himself, a most delightful comedy might have been produced, by making Celia the ward or niece of Corvino, instead of his wife, and Bonario her lover.'¹ But there is a sense in which 'the paramountcy of Volpone' is the play; and who would sacrifice the distinctive harsh tone of *Volpone* for yet another 'most delightful comedy'?

Bonario's intervention momentarily casts Volpone and Mosca down: they even talk of suicide. Soon they start manipulating the changed circumstances to their advantage, and their machinations seem, for a time, likely to triumph. In the end, these over-reachers come tumbling down, but it is not the virtuous Bonario and Celia who prove their undoing, nor the feeble processes of Venetian law. Volpone's own relish for extemporizing to meet the new complications proves his ruin: for the gleeful experience of watching his clients' discomfiture he feigns his own death, and installs Mosca as his heir. The parasite has learned from the patron; the mutual admiration society is dissolved: they undo each other. The end of the comedy is harsh and punitive: no one 'scapes whipping. And where, in Coleridge's 'delightful comedy', virtue would triumph and Celia be married at the play's end, the pallid heroine is restored, with her dowry, to her parents. *Volpone* does not end with wedding-bells but with Volpone, the unmasked Fox, speaking the epilogue.

Throughout the comedy Sir Politic Would-be and his Fine Madame play a secondary, nevertheless an essential, part. They remain English visitors in a world of Italianate machinations which they never understand. Lady Would-be is merely a *poseuse*, a minor Mrs Malaprop, a figure of

fun – the role has been played, broadly and effectively, as a dame part. Sir Politic something more. In the theatre he emerges as the befuddled Englishman abroad, secure on in his suspicion of foreigners and his own better understanding of how things are organized by the natives. His ludicrous speculative ventures parallel Volpone's successful fleecing of his dupes; and are part of the play's satirical attack upon an irrationally acquisitive, capitalist society. Sir Pol is a contemporary satirical portrait of the English traveller. He is also, in the play's bestiary, the parrot, chattering away at second hand, and memorable for his blarney, stupidity and his vague 'general notions'. Sir Politic has been excellently played by Michael Hordern and by Jonathan Miller, and it is his essential *Englishness* which makes him funny. The Would-be pair are expendable; but to cut them from a performance of the comedy leaves the Italian dupes and manipulators relatively unfocused. They earn their part in the play.

IV

The Alchemist is a humbler, a more domestic *Volpone*. Once more the characters are more dominated and exploited by others through their own desires to get rich quick. A sucker seems to have been born every minute in Jonson's comic world, and in the Philosophers' Stone, which was supposed to turn base metals into gold, Jonson found a wonderful correlative for his gulls' selfish and inordinate desire for wealth, influence, and power. It is by holding out to the gulls the prospect of possessing the Stone, that the triumvirate of confidence-tricksters, Face, Subtle, and Dol Common, manipulate them, and win a living. But their world is very different from the rich, remote world of Volpone's Venice. The environment is Jacobean London, vividly and saltily evoked by Jonson; and where Volpone operated in part for the sheer perverse exhilaration of controlling others, these three uneasy allies are desperate chancers living on their wits. The play opens explosively with Face and Subtle quarrelling, and we are early reminded how near the bread-line Subtle has been used to living. Dol Common and Subtle are the under-dogs of the Elizabethan underworld.

The great *technical* achievement of this comedy is that Jonson was able to compress so much local life, so many special slangs and jargons, within his lively and supple blank verse. The density of the dialogue, the contemporaneity of the comedy to a Jacobean audience makes *The Alchemist* (like *Bartholomew Fair*) more difficult than *Volpone* for readers and playgoers today. While the theme of human greed and gullibility is universal, the types, the references, the vocabularies are Jacobean. The idiom is often obscure, but the dialogue and

the pace of the action are fast, and carry the reader with them. The play moves with classical almost clockwork precision, each act stepping on the heels of the preceding one, and the action is virtually continuous from (according to the Herford-Simpson edition) 9 a.m., when Dapper calls, until 3 p.m., when Lovewit unexpectedly returns home and the coney-catchers are unmasked and dispersed. *The Alchemist* is, in essence, farcical; but its quality lies in the Jonsonian synthesis of two seemingly irreconcilable elements – farce and intellect.

The structure of *The Alchemist* resembles *Volpone* in that, one by one, the principal dupes are introduced to us as they pay their morning calls. Jonson provides a superb array of types – the upstart clerk, Dapper; the shy little tobacconist, Abel Drugger, whom Garrick delighted to act; the elephantine voluptuary, Sir Epicure Mammon; and the insidious kill-joy Puritans, Ananias and Tribulation Wholesome. Each is governed by self-interest, and each is betrayed into the opportunists' hands by a dream of wealth. Even the card-sharper, Surly, who seems to embody common sense – rather like those reasonable brothers-in-law in Moliere who show up the obsessions of the Miser or the Imaginary Invalid – ends by trying to make a wealthy match with Dame Pliant. For each Jonson creates an appropriate diction and speech-rhythm. Drugger is shy and halting, the Puritans are sanctimonious, and Subtle has a splendid line of alchemical blarney. Sir Epicure's speeches *sound* almost as seductive, Marlovian, and sumptuous as *Volpone's*, but they are transparently silly and self-deluding. He is closer to *Politico Would-be* than to *Tamburlaine*.

The end of *The Alchemist* is more indulgent than that of *Volpone*. Lovewit, the rightful owner, returns suddenly, and is not really surprised at the uses to which his town house has been put. Dol Common and Subtle make their get-away, none the richer for their ingenious cozenings. Captain Face dwindles again to being Jeremy, the butler, and blandly triumphs by helping his master to a rich wife. He remains the complete opportunist. That he dodges retribution is psychologically right, and reminds the audience that con-men, like the poor, are always with us. Like *Flatterie* at the end of Sir David Lyndsay's great morality *The Thre Estates*, Face goes scot-free; the audience must be wary.

When Sir Tyrone Guthrie directed *The Alchemist* at London's Old Vic in 1962, the play was performed in modern dress. In part this was because the desire for wealth still makes people gullible today, so that the theme of the comedy remains universal. Guthrie gave a further reason in his programme-note: '... modern dress gives more point to the frequent disguises and impersonations used by the trio of rogues. In Jacobean dress, who would know who

Face was a Captain or a House Servant? Whether Subtle was a Divine or a Doctor?' The point was well taken, and Guthrie's production was fast and farcical and marvellously entertaining, reminding us, perhaps, that of Jonson's three best comedies this one shone longest and brightest on the English stage. But because Jonson used contemporary idiom and place reference so vividly, some obscurity is nowadays unavoidable, and a director may well want to make cuts. This is not a recent problem. David Garrick's acting version, shortened and with most of the limelight on the Little Tobacconist, had – according to the Jonsonian stage historian Robert Gale Noyes – 'one hundred and fifty four cuts, varying from one line to three pages'¹ – though not all were made because of obscurity. Two hundred and fifty lines were excised from Sir Epicure Mammon's part, including the one about 'the swelling unctuous pap of a fat pregnant sow'. The problem the men of the theatre still need to solve – Guthrie no less than Garrick – is how to do justice to Jonson's fusion of farce and intellectual satire. Guthrie certainly did well by Sir Epicure, who emerged in his production as a Jonsonian 'humour', a monumental caricature, but elsewhere his version, rightly hilarious, missed the moral comment which is implicit in the play's language and structure. Guthrie's *Alchemist* was great fun; Jonson's *Alchemist* is a great comedy. Dryden regarded it as Jonson's highest achievement, although *Volpone* now claims first place. Between them they demonstrate Jonson's variety within the narrow range of satirical comedy.

V

There remains Jonson's later prose-comedy, *Bartholomew Fair*. When in 1950 the Old Vic Company revived this entertainment on the open stage of the Assembly Hall at Edinburgh and later in London, Mr T. C. Worsley, usually a sympathetic critic, found the play 'the most crashing old bore'² and Mr Kenneth Tynan announced that 'the play, to stand up, certainly needs crutches'.³ Part of their dissatisfaction may be attributed to the production by George Devine which, though enjoyable, was insufficiently serious, substituting a riot of false noses and actors laughing at their own stale jokes for Jonson's contemporary realism. The reviewers prompted a critical reevaluation of this play. It is, of course, a lesser work than either *Volpone* or *The Alchemist*, although some academic critics rate it more highly.

Bartholomew Fair is a 'panoramic' structure, looser and more comprehensive than Jonson's other great comedies. It is a festive entertainment in the literal sense that it dramatizes a popular holiday, and into it Jonson packed a great deal of London life and London idiom. The

first act, which is almost a prologue to the four which follow, is essentially expository. introduces one segment of the large cast of characters, those people who, though already united through kinship, friendship, business, or Puritanical religious zeal, are really linked by one thing: their desire to go to the Fair. They are presented in ones and twos – a idiosyncratic, well-drawn gallery of types – and the opening act culminates in the entrance of the monstrous, black figure of the Puritan-hypocrite, Rabbi Zeal-of-the-Land Busy. In the second act we move to the Fair (or rather, in the Elizabethan theatre, the Fair moves to us) where another monstrous, authoritarian figure, Justice Overdo, is disguising himself in order to move, like a good Governor or Magistrate in the Elizabethan drama, unrecognized among the people. But this Justice, so bent on uncovering ‘enormities’, learns very little from his experience. The people of the Fair who are introduced in the second act have something in common with the trio in *The Alchemist* – they live by their wits. The prose-pamphlets of Thomas Nashe and others¹ testify to the Elizabethans’ intense interest in the sheer mechanics of roguery, but the moral drift of this festive comedy is that the dupes are no better than the confidence-tricksters and villains. As the comedy progresses, the people of Act One meet and mingle with the folk of the Fair, itself a symbol of the world. There seems little to choose between the fools and the knaves, especially as some of the latter have a touch of the agility and roguish skill of Face, Subtle, and Dol. At the centre of the Fair and of the comedy stands Ursula, the Pig Woman, raucous, sweating, Falstaffian. She seems almost an Earth-Mother figure, but, like the other crooks, she should not be over-romanticized by critics: after all, it is she who, as the unofficial, accommodating lavatory-attendant at the Fair, tries to entice Mistress Littlewit and Mistress Overdo into prostitution.

The structure of the comedy appears to be casual – the fresh complications of Quarloss’s disguise and of Dame Purecraft’s falling in love with a madman are brought in almost offhandedly at the closing moments of Act Four – but the underlying design is always clear. *Bartholomew Fair* ends genially: the sober, hypocritical, and authoritarian figures, the Puritan and the Justice, killjoys both, are discomfited. Zeal-of-the-Land Busy, with his prodigious rhetorical tirade against the theatre, is out-maneuvred in debate after the puppet-play within-the-play by Lantern’s puppet, and retires crestfallen. Justice Overdo (whose Christian name Adam suggests that he is a universal figure) sheds his disguise for that final moment towards which all satiric comedy inexorably moves – the judgement:

Now to my enormities: look upon me, O London! and see me, O Smithfield! The example of

justice, and mirror of magistrates, the true top of formality, and scourge of enormity.
Hearken unto my labours...!

But Overdo is silenced when one of the 'prostitutes' is unmasked, and turns out to be Mistress Overdo. The end of the play is good-humoured and forgiving, prolonging the spirit of holiday. Justice Overdo invites all the *dramatis personae* back to his house for supper. The motives of the 'upright' have been questioned; the knaves and the opportunists go free.

The appeal of *Bartholomew Fair* is in the rich and vivid execution rather than in any moral content. This execution presents difficulties for today's reader – difficulties that, as in *The Alchemist*, spring from Jonson's rich and detailed evocation of Jacobean life through contemporary and local reference, and through specific jargons and slang. Although the modern reader quickly appreciates the *vitality* of this comedy, its rich comprehensiveness, he is bound to find a good deal of it (Dan Knockem's 'vapours', for example, or Whit's stage Irish) very tiresome. And while certain characters spring vividly to life – the Justice, Zeal-of-the-Land Busy, Humphrey Wasp, Ursula – others in the large cast of characters nowadays remain obscure. Part of the pleasure for the first audiences must have been that shock of recognition as they saw their own great Fair put vividly and realistically upon the stage of the Hope Theatre at Bankside in October 1614, only a couple of months after the Fair itself had been held as usual at Smithfield.

Kenneth Tynan once called *Bartholomew Fair* 'a documentary'¹ and another drama critic Professor Eric Bentley, regards Shakespeare's major history-sequence as forming *with the comedy of Jonson's* 'the great masterpiece of social realism in English'.¹ Jonson, in an almost pedantic way, crammed a great mass of Jacobean life, idiom, and local colour, into *Bartholomew Fair*. The term 'documentary' is a somewhat bleak description of his achievement in this comedy and does scant justice to its exuberance and its richness of caricature. I should prefer to call *Bartholomew Fair* a cartoon, and to regard as distinctive its animation, its vigour and its 'panoramic' coverage of Jacobean types. Some day, I hope, Miss Joan Littlewood will direct the play in such a way as to bring to life in modern stage terms both its stylization and its realism, and to give us 'the beauty of it hot', for, literary and intellectual though Jonson's desire to cram everything in may have been, the play has analogies with the visual art of *Bartholomew Fair* may be inferior to *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*, but it links Jonson with the other celebrant of the riotous life of Bartholomew Fair, the great English cartoonist, Thomas Rowlandson.

The aims of the present edition are modest. The text of *Volpone* and *The Alchemist* is that of the First Folio *Workes* (1616) seen through the press by Jonson himself; that of *Bartholomew Fair* is based upon the posthumous Second Folio (1640), sheets of which Jonson may have seen and partly corrected before his death.

Jonson took great pains to see that his play-scripts were accurately presented to the Jacobean reader, and he adopted a standard method for the printing of the plays. Like other Elizabethan dramatists he did not give locations for his scenes save for a general indication that the action was set in London or in Venice. His practice was to start off at Act 1 Scene I and usually to begin a new scene (Scene II, Scene III, etc.) at the entrance of another character, a style which never became standard for printing plays in England as it did in France. At the head of each scene he listed the characters appearing in it: *Subtle. Face. Doctor Mammon.*, etc. The first-named character is always the first speaker, and Jonson never gave any further attribution of the opening speech. He did not indicate the precise point at which a character enters or exits when these entrances or exits do not mark the beginning or end of a scene. He gave few stage-directions (save for *Bartholomew Fair*, where the largeness of the cast and the 'busy' action seems to have made stage-directions more necessary), and these were always printed in the margin. The following conventions have been used in this edition.

SPELLING AND PUNCTUATION

The spelling has been modernized throughout, as has the punctuation, to make the sense clear to the modern reader. Thus I print *murder* where Jonson used *murther*, *venture* for his *ventur* (save where rhyme has to be preserved), and so on. Obvious misprints have been silently corrected. The minor emendations and corrections which are standard in modern editions have likewise been silently included, but, where a new reading has been adopted from a recent scholarly edition, the fact has been recorded among the critical notes at the back. Jonson's plays survive in an uncommonly good state, and I have not included a list of textual variants, knowing as I do that scholars and graduate-students who need access to the full bibliographical and textual apparatus will always prefer to use the Folios themselves, or the Oxford edition, or some other old-spelling reprint. In past participles Jonson's 'd has been extended to *ed*, and his *ed* has been stressed *èd*. Jonson's *th'*, *i'*, *ha'*, *gi'*, etc. (for *the*, *in*, *have*

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