

## Ben Jonson's Comedy of Humours

The Word "Humour":

The term "humour" comes from the ancient Greek physicians and, later, from the medieval system of medicine. This system envisaged four major humours corresponding with the four elements (fire, air, earth, and water) and possessing the quality respectively of heat, cold, dryness, and moisture.

The "complexion," "temperament," or constitution of a man depended on the proportionate alliance of the four humours or subtle juices in his body. The predominance of the moist humour caused a man to grow sanguine, of the hot to grow choleric, and so on. The prevailing idea with the physiologist was that in a healthy body there was a natural balance of all the four humours and that a disturbance of the balance was dangerous and needed to be checked. "In Elizabethan times", says Ifor Evans in A Short History of English Drama, "this medieval physiology was not treated with complete seriousness, but its vocabulary became a popular fashion in sophisticated conversation and this again Jonson exploited."

Elizabethan Interpretation:

"Humour", apart from its currency in the medieval profession, was also a catchword when Ben Jonson began to write. But his contemporaries used the word for any passing mood, whim, fancy, or caprice and not, as Ben Jonson did, for a more or less permanent and predominant peculiarity of disposition. Shakespeare, like the rest, used the word in the sense of mood or fancy. For instance, in the Richard III we have:

Was ever -woman in this-humour wooed?

Was ever -woman in this humour won?

Again, in The Merchant of Venice, when Shylock is asked why he prefers a pound of the flesh of Bassanio's heart to the sum of three thousand ducats, he replies:

It is my humour

Jonson's Interpretation:

Ben Jonson dissociated himself from this degenerate meaning of the word "humour", took it back to its original physiological sense and fitted it into the context of his concept of the nature and function of comedy. Just as a man has in his physique a dominant humour, similarly he has in his psyche a dominant passion. Under the influence of this dominant passion a man may become, as the case may be, greedy, jealous, cowardly, deceitful, foolhardy, and so forth. As Jonson clarified in the Prologue to Every Man out of His Humour, he was taking the word "humour" from medicine and was using it as a metaphor for the general disposition of a man—that is, his psychological set-up. He explains that

When some one peculiar quality  
Doth so possess a man that it doth draw  
All his effects, his spirits, and his powers,  
In their confluents, all to run one way;  
This may truly be said to be a humour.

The Purpose of Comedy:

Ben Jonson's comedy is called the comedy of humours as it aimed primarily at the representation of such characters as were motivated mainly or entirely by their peculiar, dominant passions or humours. Jonson felt that, in the words of a critic, "the purpose of comedy is to note those elements in human character which are either naturally and

permanently dominant in each man, or which on occasion, in the hazard of life, overflow and exceed their limits at the expense of the other contributing elements to represent a number of characters differently humoured; and in the clash of contrasts to paint with pleasant laughter, the moral of these disorders. A man whom we call avaricious because avarice to us is his most striking characteristic and to him his most absorbing humour may either preserve the established proportion of his dominating quality in all his dealings, or under stress of living in a peculiar set of circumstances, let it grow at the expense of other qualities. In the first case, he may be said to be 'in his humour' and in the second, to be 'out of his humour.' Both are excellent material for comic dramatisation and the question is one of degree. The latter is the more tempting to the playwright not merely because excess gives him more striking stage effects, but because it serves his ethical purpose better because of the enormity of its magnitude." The comedy of humours had a highly didactic aim which was sought to be realised through satire levelled at various humours. Volpone is a satire on cupidity and depravity of human character. The Alchemist on greed, Bartholomew Fair on hypocritical Puritans, The Silent Woman on jittery melancholiacs afraid of noise, The Staple of News on irresponsible news mongering and the uncultured craving for thrills, and so on. It was not without reason that Ben Jonson characterised more than one of his comedies as "comical satires."

Is Jonson an Imitator?:

We have not so far referred to Jonson's indebtedness to classical dramatists in arriving at his concept of the comedy of humours. It was partly his classical instruction and taste which led him to this concept. But it is a popular misrepresentation to assert that Jonson was a mechanical imitator of the Roman comic dramatists-Plautus and Terence. "There is no doubt that in Latin comedy," to quote I. Forster Evans, "each character belonged to a recognizable type, and maintained throughout certain well-defined attributes." However, as a critic observes, "it is really a strange critical error to hold that the Jonsonian conception of the dramatic humour is only an English copy of Plautine and Terentian types and that his braggarts and gulls and misers were but Romans in doublet and ruff..." Jonson was no transcriber. He acknowledged "no man" his "master." His dramatic art came not from the study of literature but the study of life. His insistence that comedy should be real and English comedy should be English and real was meant partly to dispel the charge that his comic art was merely literary, far removed from life and only a scholar's affair. His native vigour and originality save him from being treated as a mechanical transcriber. He was a redoubtable scholar, but, what is more important, "he was", in the words of David Daiches in A Critical History of English Literature, "also a rugged Englishman with a sardonic relish for the varied and colourful London life of his day...he showed enormous and impressive originality even when most closely following classical models or applying rules from classical theory or practice." Take an example. Most of the humours in his first important comedy Every Man in His Humour have their prototypes in the classical comedy of Plautus and Terence. But all of them are Londoners, not Romans, and are drawn not from books but observation. The jealous husband, the timid father, the corrupt son, the cunning slave or parasite, the simple gull, and the boasting but cowardly soldier of Plautus and Terence have suggested Ben Jonson's Kiteley the merchant, the elder Knowell, the younger Knowell (he is not corrupt indeed but it is supposed by his father to be so), Brainworm, Matthew

and Stephen (the town and the country gull respectively), and Bobadill. All of them are no mere copies but represent a lively cross-section of London society of the age of Ben Jonson. A critic observes regarding these characters : "No more genuine sketches of London character are to be found in the annals of the drama." They are children of Jonson's own observation; and as an observer, he had, save Shakespeare, few rivals among his contemporaries.

Advantages of the Humour Technique:

There were some obvious advantages Jonson derived from the adoption of the humour technique. The chief among them are given below:

- (i) First, it allowed him to dispense with the traditional clown or jester. The farcical laughter arising from the grotesque and slapstick farce of clownery could be substituted by the clash of humours.
- (ii) Secondly, it provided a meeting-ground between classical theory and modern life.
- (iii) Thirdly, as the introduction of humours put the dramatic emphasis on character at the cost of incident, it threw out of favour, once and for all, the comedy of mere intrigue.
- (iv) Lastly, it rendered it possible for the master of satiric comedy, the doughty champion of classicism, and the most powerful of Elizabethan realists to be united in the same man. Jonson threw the massive weight of his dramatic genius against the current of popular taste and succeeded in pruning the romantic excesses of Elizabethan comedy.

The Disadvantages:

A very grave danger inherent in the envisagement and representation of humours was the possibility of a falsification of human nature. The characters were apt to grow wooden and monotonous. Gregory Smith observes in this connexion : "In the first place, the presentation of certain selected humours throughout a long play involves the playwright, as it does novelists like Dickens, in one .offte two risks: either of making the characters too rigid or uniform in habit, puppet-like after the fashion of the personages in the old Morality, and dramatically unreal or in the consciousness of this danger, of striving to escape from it by exaggeration...In the second place...characters thus fixed tend to become too simple. Even when the humour is not plain study of a single folly, but a complex impression of several with one only slightly overtopping the rest, it is hard to sustain the combination throughout the action." Jonson does manage, thanks to his vigour and originality, to negotiate these dangers pretty safely. It cannot be said that his characters are only wooden figures, representatives of types and embodiments of specific traits as are the characters of the morality plays of the Middle Ages. He does manage to breathe into them a life of their own. As T. S. Eliot maintains, rather partially, in *The Sacred Wood*, Shakespeare's characters are "no more alive than are the characters of Jonson."

In spite of their realism and vividness Ben Jonson's humours are open to the charge of being psychologically too simple. It-is'often said that he was not acquainted with man in his fulness and that he built on the surface and built but a single storey. The complexities of human psyche find no expression. "There is,"-says a critic, "no light and shade, the cross-play of motives is apt to be neglected; and above all, he misses the inconsistency which is so powerful an element in the nature of us all." "He," says another critic, "chooses a general idea-cunning, folly, severity, Itlst-and makes a person out of it. He takes an abstract quality, and putting together all the acts to which it may give rise, trots it out on the stage in a man's dress. Now it is a vice selected from the

catalogue of moral philosophy sensuality thirsting for gold: the perverse double inclination becomes a personage, Sir Epicure Mammon; before the alchemist, before his friend, before his mistress, In public or alone, all his words denote a greed of pleasure and of gold, and they express nothing more. Now it is a piece of madness gathered from the old sophists, a tremendous horror of noise; this form of mental pathology becomes a personage, Morose." To have a humour is almost a whole-time profession. It is to some extent, an over-simplification of human nature amounting to its falsification. Ben Jonson's characters are, to adopt R. M. Forster's phraseology in his Aspects of the Novel, flat and not round characters. They are all predictable and are "not capable of surprising us in a convincing way." They do not have the unpredictability of life, though they are lively and arresting.