

Ben Jonson's Contribution to English Comedy

Introduction:

Ben Jonson's importance in the history of English drama is mainly due to his envisagement of a new kind of comedy of which he gave excellent examples. He was a vigorous crusader for good sense and rectitude. From the very beginning of his dramatic career (the closing years of the sixteenth century) he undertook, what he thought, the reform of Elizabethan drama, and particularly comedy.

He appeared at a time when the University Wits such as Marlowe, Lyly, Greene, Kyd, and Nashe were establishing upon the stage what is called "romantic drama." To those like Ben Jonson who had any respect for classical drama and its canons, as also moderation, sanity, and the moral and intellectual well-being of man, the romantic comedies and histories offered much that was abominably absurd and lawless. He was critical of romantic extravagance and the egregious lack of realism as well as the general ignorance, or defiance, of the classical rules sanctified by the theories and practice of the ancient Greeks and Romans. Frequent changes of place, long duration of the time represented, absence of a unified plan or coherent structure, mingling of farce and tragedy, of clowns and kings, lack of definite aesthetic or ethical aims, and, in short an easy disregard of precision and discipline appeared to Jonson as indefensible errors. The themes treated were as objectionable as the treatment. The romantic plays told simply impossible stories and did not imitate life or nature. They dealt with idealised heroes, far-flung places, unbelievable adventures and vicissitudes, and flamboyant situations. The drama before Ben Jonson was romantic insofar as

- (i) it did not adhere to the theory and practice of the ancients and
- (ii) it did not attempt a representation of actuality.

Ben Jonson's reformation of drama meant, in fact, his correction of these twin romantic tendencies. He tried to establish, instead, a comic form and a tragic form based on the classical practice and to bring drama nearer life. In the field of tragedy he had no tangible success (he wrote only two tragedies), but in that of comedy he succeeded in making himself the greatest figure of his age.

Jonson's Classicism:

We will consider Jonson's achievement and contribution in the field of comedy with respect to his following three tendencies:

- (i) Classicism
- (ii) Realism
- (iii) Moralism

They are not so well defined, nor are they capable of being accurately differentiated from one another. But they are all in fundamental opposition to "romanticism."

Ben Jonson had great deference for the classical antiquity, and he often referred to the great Greek and Roman dramatists with unqualified adoration. In spite of the fact that he could not sport a University degree-unlike the University Wits-he was well-read in the classics. His protest against romantic drama, says Thorndike, was similar in its essentials to Matthew Arnold's protest against the romantic school of poetry. He wanted, observed this critic, that the drama should-"rest on right appreciation of the classics^and a rationalised study of the present." Jonson wished to take the drama, as - far as possible, to the purposes and methods of the Greeks and Romans. For this

purpose it was required of him to obey certain set rules which critics had derived from the classical practice. These rules were:

(a) The so-called "three unities"-those of place, time, and action. The first requires the scene of the play to be restricted to the same town. The second, requires the action of the play not to be extended over a period of more than twenty-four hours. The third requires the play to represent one single and well-constructed plot, without structurally superfluous episodes, sub-plots, or by-plots.

(b) The laws of decorum which require:

(i) The separation of the species. Tragedy and comedy are to be set apart and not allowed to mingle with each other.

(ii) A certain propriety in characterisation. Characterisation should not be capricious and confused, but should be based on an accurate analysis of life. Every character should be a representative as well as an individual. Any king, for example, should represent kings in general; a jealous husband should exhibit the typical traits of jealousy, and neither person should lapse into mere individual whimsy.

Only by adherence to such sane principles, Ben Jonson believed, could the flagrant and dangerous departure from artistic standards and classical discipline be arrested. Ben Jonson's classicism earns for him the remark of David Daiches that "he is the one great example in English of the Renaissance humanist (in the narrowest sense of that term) turned dramatist and poet." But it must be pointed out that Ben Jonson was not a slavish imitator of the classical dramatists. He treated them more as guides than as masters. He was less rigid in practice than in theory, and even in theory he admitted the need of "some place for digression and art." He does not, for example, always observe the unities. In the Prologue to his greatest comedy Volpone he claimed about himself: The laws of time, place, persons he observeth.

From no needful rule he swerveth.

But in practice he did "swerve" from many "needful" rules which he tenaciously championed in theory. In the very play just mentioned the strict unity of action is violated by the admittance of a sub-plot. In Bartholomew Fair, again, the action is episodic rather than architectonically perfect. In Every Man out of His Humour, the characters sleep one night in the country and return to the town the next morning, thus violating the unity of time. In the tragedy Catiline, the hero flies to join his army in Tuscany, thus violating the unity of place. These instances show that Jonson did not allow the classical rules to straitjacket his artistic liberty or to arm-twist his native tendencies. What he fell foul of was the heady licence to go to improbable length in these matters

Jonson's Realism:

Ben Jonson's chief contribution to English comedy lies in his effort to bring it much nearer reality. He was a champion of all-round realism and was quick to dissociate himself from the romantic extravagances, grotesqueries, and, in a word, a wanton disregard of unvarnished actuality. In his very first play Every Man in His Humour he was decisively articulate about the intention of his kind of comedy. He proposed as theme and vehicle of his comedy

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

He felt that comedy, as distinguished from tragedy (in which the remote or the ideal does not hinder, and may even help, the dramatist's purpose), had lost its touch with life in romantic extravagance. Reaction had already set in against this as for example, in the work of his friend Chapman : in his *All Fools* the continuity of the story is broken up into more or less elaborate studies of characters or "humours" in some respects suggestive of Jonsonian characters. The change imperceptible in Middleton and Marston, too. But Jonson, if not the first, to express this change, was the first to define it and to supply the appropriate canons thereof. He was the first to propound realism in comedy in critical and well-defined terms. As T. S. Eliot in his critical study of Ben Jonson in *The Sacred Wood* observes, "the interest in the depiction and criticism of the actual life of the day—an interest essential to vitality in the literature of any age—had its chief exponent in Jonson." He was as intimately acquainted with the life and manners of the Londoners of his age as the author of *The Canterbury Tales*. Lamb, Smollett, and Dickens were with those of the Londoners of their respective ages. His comedies bring to the fore all types of people from nobles to beggars, and landlords to water-carriers. Most of them have for the scene of action not the romantic Forest of Arden, nor the enchanted island of *The Tempest*, nor the idyllic land of Illyria, but the real London with its panorama of humanity, its brightness, and squalor. Jonson cannot be justly dismissed as a grim and pedantic classicist as, to use the words of Daiches, he was also "a rugged Englishman with a sardonic relish for the varied and colourful London life of his day..."

Ben Jonson's comedy is also called the "comedy of humours" as he analysed society into "humours" or dominant characteristics. These humours are types maintaining throughout the play "certain well-defined attributes." This sometimes makes them look static, or, to use the term put into vogue by E. M. Forster, "flat". But here again Jonson is no slave of his rules. He makes his types look lively and realistic by strongly individualising them with certain auxiliary characteristics. T. S. Eliot maintains that Ben Jonson's "comic characterisation remains among the greatest achievements of the English drama because of its clearness and certainty, its richness of humour and its dramatic veracity."

Jonson's Moralism:

Jonson's intention to show the image of the times was not an end in itself, but only a means to his end, which was to reform the society of his age by ridding it of all follies and aberrations. He fervently announced:

I'll strip the ragged follies-of the time

Naked as at their birth;

And with a whip of steel

Print wounding lashes in their iron ribs.

His "whip of steel" was his very powerful satire. The element of satire is quite dominant in Ben Jonson's comedies. In fact, he characterised some of his comedies as "comic satires." According to him, comedy was expected not to pander to rude and thrill-hungry crowds by transporting them to unrealistic regions created by the poet's fancy, but to perform a seriously ethical purpose. It had to mock at baseness and folly in their lesser degrees by sporting "with human follies, not with crimes." He tells the Universities in the *Dedication of Volpone* that his "special aim" is "to put the snaffle in their mouths that cry out, we never punish vice in our interludes." In his preoccupation with ethical

considerations he went so far as to assert "the impossibility of any man's being the good poet, without first being a good man." Again, in the Prologue to *Every Man out of His Humour* he proclaims:

I will scourge those apes
And to these courteous eyes oppose a mirror
As large as is the stage whereon we act,
Where they shall see the time's deformity
Anatomized in every nerve and sinew
With constant courage and contempt of fear.

In *Volpone* (where the scene is not London but Venice) Jonson satirises greed, lust, cruelty, treachery, and lewdness. In *The Alchemist*, likewise, the evils of greed and trickery are exposed and satirised. In *The Staple of News* he lashes the crude taste for newsmongering. In *Bartholomew Fair* hypocritical Puritans are made the butt of ridicule. In *The Silent Woman* people with a pathological hatred of gaiety and noise (as exemplified by Morose) are attacked. In *Every Man in His Humour* the attack is levelled alike at the boasting but cowardly soldiers, jealous husbands, and town and country gulls. Thus in practically all of his comedies we meet with a satiric and didactic aim. This aim sometimes does violence to the true dramatic art. He was a dramatic artist. His sense of crisp dialogue, his uncanny mastery of situation and suspense, his masculine vigour and anti-sentimentalism, his distrust of tear-jerking devices, his adeptness at plot-construction, his keen study of actual men and manners, and above all, his genuine poetic impulse, particularly his lyrical strain, sustain his comedies at a very high artistic level and do not allow them to be bogged down by their pronounced purposiveness.

"The School of Ben":

Jonsonian comedy attracted the attention of a very large number of his contemporaries and excited emulation among the numerous assembly of playwrights known as "the sons of Ben." Unfortunately most of them copied their "father" too slavishly, without the equipment of equally excellent dramatic or poetic gifts. Thus what was true of the followers of Chaucer (the Chaucerians) and those of Shakespeare was also true of Ben Jonson. Shadwell was his very close follower. The works of such dramatists as Sir Robert Howard, brother-in-law of Dryden, and even Sheridan exhibit some influences of the comedy of humours. Even while in the Restoration age a new kind of comedy—the comedy of manners—came to be established, "Jonson" says Allardyce Nicoll, "still held his position as chief of comic dramatists." Dryden in his *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* placed him alongside Shakespeare, "In the latter part of his career", avers David Daiches, "he was the leader of an important literary group and indeed something of a literary dictator, the first significant example of that species in English literature." It was not for nothing that his epitaph in Westminster Abbey carried the words:

"O rare Ben Jonson."