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A STUDY OF SATIRE OF MAJOR COMEDIES BY BEN JONSON

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ABSTRACT

Due to the changeable economic, political and social circumstances which the Elizabethan age witness, there appeared several writers who tried to employ their writings in order to solve the problems that faced their society which took place as a result these changes. Among these writers, Ben Jonson, a prominent playwright who is considered as the second famous English playwright after Shakespeare during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I and James, devotes his writings to directing a severe satire to the moral follies and deviations emerging in his society. He believes that society cannot become an ideal one, unless man is capable of overcoming these follies, thus he can ascend his society to the golden world of which he was dreaming.

There is unanimous agreement on the fact that Jonson's fame is mainly ascribed to his matchless abilities in adopting a satire in his writings.

INTRODUCTION

Ridicule is derived from the Latin word **Satire** which means "medley, hotch-potch, a mixture full of different things" (Highet, 1962: 18, 231). In the 16th century its meaning is extended to include any writing which contains ridicule, condemnation or irony. The original meaning of satire survives to a large extent even today.

The important satiric work that survived from ancient Greek drama was that of the philosophical satirist's writing theorists similar to Plato, the fantasy of Aristophanes, and the negative criticism of the satirists. In Greek there was a great satirist called Menippus who wrote Satire in prose mixed with verse which he used to ridicule his philosophical enemies (Highet, 1949: 304).

The two great Roman satirists Horace and Juvenal, who may be regarded

as the founding fathers of satire both wrote satire in verse. Juvenal, whose Satire is bitter and severe, is considered very prominent and still worth reading and reconsidering.

The Roman Satire would be defined as:

A continuous piece of verse, or of prose mingled with verse, of considerable size, with great variety of style and subject, but generally characterized by the free use of conversational language, the frequent intrusion of its authors' personality, its predilection for wit, humor and irony, great vividness and concreteness of description, shocking obscenity in themes and language, an improvisatory tone, topical subjects, and the general intention of improving society by

exposing its vices and follies. Its essence is summed up in the words' ridentem dicereuerum "Joking in earnest".

(Hight, 1949: 305)

This is applicable to modern satire.

In fact, Satire could be traced back to the literature of primitive people who used the two basic literary forms of Satire, the lampoon or the personal attack, travesty or the fantastic vision of the world (Hodgart, 1969: 14). Paul Radin remarks that each primitive society developed literary culture in which all the genres of literature exist including Satire (Radin, 1959: 34).

Obscenity played an important role in the satiric literary output from ancient to modern times. It has been noticed that "the tradition of obscenity .., began with Aristophanes up to Pope" (Hodgart, 1969: 28). The Satirists usually use obscenity to expose the artificial appearances of man because man without these appearances is much similar to another man. The Satirist can go further by using the satiric obscenity to reduce man to the condition of a beast.

Satire is defined by various scholars and literary critics.

Mathew Hodgart, for instance believes that "Satire is the use of ridicule, sarcasm, irony, etc. to expose, attack or deride vices, follies etc., of man and his various institutions" (Hodgart, 1969: 10).

Satire in English literature goes back to the medieval period: Chaucer's **Canterbury Tales** the most remarkable satiric output during this period. In the sixteenth century Thomas More's **Utopia** is brilliant among the satirical works. In the late sixteenth century, which, witnessed an increasing tendency towards writing satire; Ben Jonson's satirical plays, which are going to be further discussed later on, are the best examples of the satiric works in the 16th century, besides the satire of Donne, Marston, Lodge, and Joseph Hall (Frye, 1979: 32). In the second half of the seventeenth century, Dryden is the major English satirist; his most famous satiric works are "**Absalom and Achitophel**", "**The Medal**", "**MacFlecknoe**" and "**The Hind and the Panther**".

It is accepted to a large extent that the satirist carries a moral mission to mend his society, through the reformation of man and his institutions. Dryden states that "satire is an act of virtue to make examples of vicious men" (Dryden, 1979: 32) who must be attacked mercilessly:

both for their own amendment ... and for the terror of others, to hinder them from falling into these enormities which they see so severely punished in persons of others. (Dryden: 32)

The great satirist, Pope, Relieves that the satirist is like a surgeon; and satire is his probe to cure the painful disease, though with a painful instrument (Edward and Bloom: 33). Therefore, it is quite unjust to consider the satirist as an enemy to his society; it is just as to consider the physician as an enemy of his patient when he prescribes a painful treatment for him (Highet, 1962: 241).

The satirists, in their protest against the follies and vices of their societies, use either persuasive or punitive satire. It largely depends on the satirist's point of view to the evils and vices he attacks. If the satirist is an optimist who believes that human follies and vices are the results of the ignorance of individuals, the cure is possible through satire to persuade man to give up his follies. In other words, no matter to what extent the world is corrupted, there is, the optimistic satirist believes, still a place for goodness and virtue. Thus, the possibility of reformation is vast. On the other hand, if the satirist is a pessimist who believes in the theory of the original sin of man, and in man's

inability to free himself from wickedness, the punishment through satire is inescapable. Gilbert Highet maintains that "there are two different views of the purpose of satire. The optimist writes in order to heal, the pessimist in order to punish. One is a physician, the other an executioner" (Highet, 1962: 237).

The satirists usually use certain devices as a vehicle for their satiric aims. Some of these devices are: distortion, exaggeration, humour, ridicule, wit, contrast, reduction, magnification, and obscenity. W.H. Auden refers to two other satiric devices when he indicates that "the victim of satire should be presented either unaware of the nature of his act", or "completely conscious" (Auden, 1971: 203).

Satire usually uses one or more of the literary forms, such as lampoon or invective, burlesque, parody, irony, beast's fables, Utopian fiction, allegory, aphorism, and an epigram (Hodgart, 1969: 13).

DRAMA AND SOCIETY IN THE ELIZABETHAN AGE

Plays, poems, and prose writings of the Elizabethan writers are clear monuments of a remarkable age. There is a variety of topics about which those writers can argue, yet still the basic subject of a great part of Elizabethan Literature is the

conflict between the demonstrative individualism and the traditional sense of the moral order. As writers arguing about the problems of humanity, Shakespeare, Marlowe, Jonson and others are able enough to gather principles of philosophy with examples taken from the daily life in order to create real view before the audience. It is worth mentioning that these writers deepened, rather imitated, mainly the traditional order of moralities as regarded a pure model to follow; this imitation, they think create a world in which man is under " suggestion to the snares of the world and flesh, but the means of rising him to active virtue and civility; even more the revealing of the highest point of man's wit, the creative of divinity in the human mind" (Backeless, 1953: 46). The close attaches by the dramatists to the popular speech and old traditions help them to near the audience's mind.

The early comedies of the 16th century are not serious themes as it is in the comedies of Shakespeare or Jonson. Jonson's comedies are written to serve other purposes. Udall's **Ralph Roaster Doister** and Stevenson's **Grammar Gurton's Needle**, both dating 1553 are written as practical experiences of grammar schools to train their students in rhetoric. The comic plots which are borrowed from Italy are other specimen of

the farce such as **I Suppose** (The Substitutes). A somewhat similar comedy is **The Bugbears** which employs rough rhyming verses instead of prose and follows the Italian sources. Another Munday's comedy, **II Fedele**, (1575) is essentially a love intrigue but not a serious comedy. All these plays and some other ones are farces depending in their ideas on some foreign sources without giving a serious lesson to their audiences.

When Robert Greens (1558-1592) and George Peele (1556-1596) wrote anew tendency in the Elizabethan theatre came to life. Lath then satire was firstly introduced to the Elizabethan comedies. They pen their plays to express deeper tones than those of the earliest comedies. Their plays become more pronounced and serious. They own the fascination of liveliness and fluency, and the interest of the pioneer work in some of the main thread of the Shakespearean drama deliberately woven together.

Greene is one of the first men of letters to make his own profession the entertainment of a broad public. His plays are to speak of London life and its people. **A Looking Glasse for London and England**, written in collaboration with Lodge in 1590 is a sensational biblical morality. It is a sequence of diatribes against vice by the prophet Oases. This

work contains within evil specimen of people such as a drunken ruffian who killings another for a wench or a scene in which an aspiring princess poisons one husband so as to marry another, where upon Oases explains:

Where whoredom reigns,
there murder follows fast...
London, behold the cause of others
wrack. (Fowler, 1967: 136)

Greene discusses in his work, as a result of the changes that taken place in his own society, every one's place in that society. In his time "it is important to assert one's place in society as high as one scan pretend to" (Rowes, 1953: 279). Hence comes the constant insistence upon gentility in his writings. Robert Cecil thinks it worthwhile to assert his gentility at an Essex trial: "For wit, I give you preeminence. You have it abundantly. For birth also I give you place. I'm not noble, yet a gentleman" (Rowes, 1953: 280). Jonson also thinks of this case in his various plays, he says in **Every Man Out of His Humour** portraying one who would be a gentleman: "Now look you Carlo: this is my humour now; I have land and money; my friends left me well, and I will be a gentleman whatsoever it cost me" (Wilkes and Others, 1982: 42-44).

Those men, with their strife for a place in society, cause evil and vices. In

Greene's **Quipped for an Upstart Courtier**, the vices of covetousness and pride are opposed to the virtues of charity and hospitality, Greene says:

Since men placed their delight in proud looks and brave attire, hospitality was left off, neighborhood was exiled, conscience was scoffed at and charity lay frozen in the streets: now upstart gentlemen for the maintenance of that their fathers never looked after, raised rents, racked their tenants and imposed their fines. (Fowler, 1967: 81)

In Greene's time, so, civility was no longer an ideal but a problem. Greene's reaction is to go back to folk tradition for weapons of ridicule against all the new tendencies he dislikes. In this way Greene helps to stimulate two of the main developments in the literature of his time, the rebirth of satire, and the treatment of the theme of folly and civility. The man of letters turned to satire as a corrective measure of public morals.

In the works of Greene, dissatisfaction gives rise to the generalized satire about characters like they would be wit (or gull), the melancholy gallant, the malcontent, the professional charlatan, the seedy adventurer, the Machiavellian skeptic, the usurer and the sycophants. To

sum up the main goal for Greene is to expose the wrong doings of people and he, indeed, succeeds in revealing and curing those ills.

Peele, on the other hand, is over a poet and more a man of the drama than Greene. His three surviving works: the **Battle of Alcazar**, Edward I, and the tragedy of **David and Bethsabe** illuminate, in particular, the sense of satire and its ranges which flourished later on in the Elizabethan drama, and which was later on to culminate in the works of Jonson clearly.

Peele's works are designed to express a more serious and deeper tone than the works that preceded his. The« liveliest of his plays **The Old Wives' Tale** (1593) is closer to ridicule and mimic than any other Elizabethan play.

The courtly entertainment in Peele's **The Arraignment of Paris** (1584) is another specimen of satire of the false nationhood and political deformity. "This work is a serious one coloured by critical notes every now and then which are very plain in many other popular works about the British daily life in the latter half of the Elizabethan reign" (Ibid: 52).

Peele's works reveal an intensive preoccupation with the themes of courtly life, yet they do not ignore the social

results of the economic changes that took place in England. Peele, along with many other writers of his time, gives an abundant evidence that he is "aware of a modification in the structure of his society" (Ibid: 53), and most of the writers express either their approval or disapproval to what goes on in the society, Peele attacks severely the follies and wrong deeds of the rising Middle Glass. In **The Old Wives' Tale**, he expresses his intentions which are to:

Instruct the envious with
how chaste aflame

Thou war must the lover;
how severely just

Thou wert to punish, if he
burn'd to lust;

How epidemic errors by thy
play

Were laugh'd out of esteem,
so purg'd away;

How to each sense thou
didst virtue fit

That all grew virtuous to be
thought t' have wit. (Ibid: 76)

Peele thus instructs and teaches his society by satirizing all the parties of the society without any strong prejudice; he adds saying:

Of all men I love not these
gallants; they'll

prate much but do little:
they are people

most uncertain ; they use
great words, but

little sense; great beards,
but little wit;

great breeches, but no
money. (Ibid: 79)

Peele's methods of expressing satire concerning the changeable conditions of his time, have signified the fashionable wage and the meaning of satire. It also signifies his structure in forming his models of characters which, in turn, develop his idea of "ridiculing the bad and praising the useful" (Chambers, 1968: 98). The comedies of Jonson, at the end of the decade, follow these examples, yet with further expansion; he follows directly Greene and Peele in their satiric portraits of their societies.

With Ben Jonson a new meaning of satire comes ahead. If the dramatists who handle social themes, Jonson is undoubtedly one of the greatest. He is famous for his sensitive attitudes concerning human desires. By Jonson, many significant developments concerning the wide knowledge of the fundamental

human qualities appear. He becomes an observer of the social, religious, economic and political thinking of his time while following the changeable events in these aspects. In Jonson, the reader and the audience can easily follow the obvious thread of the connection between the dramatic literature and the social ordering of society.

The audience can trace in Jonson's plays the economic problems. He can see before his eyes the gulf between wealth and poverty. He notices and see men who secure the lion's share of commercial and industrial profits (profits resulting from the same general process that created the rootless poverty of the Lowest classes of London) were men who stood outside the current traditions. Hence, in part, the attacks on the new men and the questioning of the whole order which they represented. Jonson attacks usurers monopolists and patentees and he shows many signs of recognizing the element of monopoly in the older organizations and of appreciating the attempts regulate trade and industry by means of patents. The negative results of the clashing vices is cleverly handled by Jonson and smoothly presented to the audience.

Marston goes on to attack Jonson when he refers to Jonson's poverty and "his cut sleeves and worn black suit, which

melancholy grab, he was forced to exchange for a player's cast-off stain doublet. His conviction for homicide and his branded thumb; his face 'punched full of holes like a warming pan; his envious-looking countenance a lean hollow-cheekscarg" (Goldsmith, 1961: 73). This bitter attack on him makes him feel the severity of the words of his literary enemies. H.C. Hart says that "Jonson's equanimity is seriously disturbed by these attacks, possessed, as undoubtedly is, of a hasty and violent temper, but readily placated. The chief changes the playwrights brought against him, beside his biting general censures in his comical satires" (Hart, 1960: xi).

Jonson feels it necessary to defend himself thus diverts to satire to defend his reputation against all these harsh attacks. This explains to the reader Jonson's individuality and his satiric sardonic self.

Satire is a medium of exposing good and bad Jonson deeds. Jonson agrees with other critics that the playwright's function is to build a new brave world, a second creation in which the limits of the first one are transcended. Satire restores man to his original self and brings back the Golden Age and rediscovers his true Kingdom.

Jonson deepens the idea of satire while writing realistically. His language

makes clear that he is a conscious reformer of the society. He always thinks of achieving some special dramatic effects in favor of the 'correct' and thus he makes much of the energy of his plays to have a compelling movement and with special overwhelming conclusions. He arises feelings which go along with the already decided resolutions, and the result is a play which is sufficiently understood by the audience because it is about his society and is written to correct it. This duality in Jonson's plays differentiates him from Greene and Peele who looked it. Jonson's satire means the reproving the human foibles by holding them up to ridicule.

Jonson wants to present a satiric picture of his own day to attack the ills of his age; he refuses, as he states in the Prologue to his first play **Every Man In His Humour** (1598):

To make a child, now
swaddled, to proceed

Man, and then shoot up, in
one board and weed,

Past three scores years: or,
with three rusty swords

And help of some few foot-
and-half-foot words,

Fight over york and
Lancaster's long Jar's,

And in the tiding house
bring wounds to scars.

He rather prays, you will be
pleased to see

One such today as other
plays should be.

(Wilkes & Others, 1962: 7-
14)

About the method adopted by
Jonson to explain the meaning and the goal
of the comedy he writes; he adopts the old
explanation of the human character by the
four fluids to develop 'a comedy of
humours', a comedy in which each
character is seen to be dominated, and
even obsessed, by one particular quirk due
to one of the four bodily fluids: choler,
blood, phlegm and black bile, each of
which release 'spirits' which rise to the
brain and affect a person's behavior
(Stromberg, 1968: 107-108).

He explains his view in the
Induction to his next comedy **Every Man
Out of His Humour** (1599)

As waiting power to contain
itself

Is humour, so in every
human body

The choler, melancholy,
phlegm and blood,

By reason that they flow
continually

In some one part, and are
not continent,

Receive the name humours.
Now thus far

It may be metaphor apply
itself

Unto the general
disposition,

As when someone peculiar
quality

Doth so possess a man that
it doth draw

All his affects, his spirits
and his powers,

In their conflictions, all to
run one way:

This may be truly said to be
a funny.

(Induction: 103-115)

He concentrates mainly on the two
important aspects of comedy: delight and
instructive ridicule which remain the
general goal of the Jonsonian comedy.
This duality in Jonson's drama resembles
life itself of which Jonson says:

I have considered our life like a play, where in everyman, forgetful of himself, is in trivial with expression of another. Nay, we so insist in imitating others, as we cannot (when it is necessary) return to ourselves; like children that imitate the vices of stammers so long till at last they become such and make the habit to another nature, as it is never forgotten. Good men are the stars, the planets of the ages where in they live and illustrate the time. God did never let them be wanting to the world; As Abel for an example of innocence, Enoch of purity, Noah of trust in God's mercies...These, sensual men thought mad, because they would not be partakers or practices of their madness. But they, placed high on the top of all virtue, looked down on the stage of the world and condemned the play of Fortune. For though the most be players, some must be spectators.

(Goldsmith, 1961: 73)

In this way the purpose of a comedy within this theatre is both punitive and edifying, to bring the blame worthy to feel shame for their foolishness or ignorance, to repent and to reconcile with

the good people - (The stars) - in the society.

Jonson plans his plays as critical manifestos. There is no action, but a series of satiric figures as is displayed in **Every Man Out of His funny** where the nature of this comedy is defined by the presenters and the society at large is satirized. As per, the embodiment of satire, is of an ingenious and frees spirit, eager and constant in reproof, presents the play:

O how I hate the
monstrousness of time,

When every servile
imitating spirit,

Plagued with an itching
leprosy of wit,

I a more halting fury,
strives of fling

His ulcerous body in the
Spain spring,

And straight leaps forth.

Jonson's repetition of the idea of satire in his first two plays clears to the audience his real intention behind writing comedy. He thinks of reaching perfection through satire. He tells his audience that "Our erected with makes us to know what perfection is, and yet our infected will keep us from reaching unto it. Jonson, then

feels that his mission is to correct the time's deformity even if that means the application of a whip of steel.

In Jonson's comedies the audience is amongst London associations, and dealing with people like himself. In some of the successful plays like **Every Nan in His funny Every Man Out of His funny** , **The Alchemist** and **Volpone** the artist in Jonson sets forth the students of the intellectual whims satirically, yet he takes and keeps an interest in his story.

In effect, Jonson reshapes his audience to make him more aware of the evil around him. He asks him to transfer his mind beyond mere laughter into a finer awareness so that he can be a good understand , not a mere on looker.

What helps Jonson to give his messages is the magic of rhetoric in his language and the contemplation of virtue he has in mind. Along with these important factors comes the fact that he, when constructing his comedies, is conscious enough of the rules of writing comedy, which are mainly based on the Greek and Roman ones. From Plautus and Terence he learns a good deal not only about the construction of plots but about portraying characters as well. He invents them to fit the plot of a comedy; they are not important as individuals so much as part of his play representing some human

qualities, so that the characters, when interact with each other represent the interaction of people in society. They are, in effect, caricatures rather than real people, but they are convincing enough on the stage even though they seem to exist in order to exemplify some vice or other. The audience is not invited to sympathize with them; he is expected to be objective, and either to object to them since they are bad and immoral characters, or to approve them because they are innocent ones.

CONCLUSION

It has been elucidated through the three previous chapters of the thesis that Ben Jonson's satire is the fruit of the accumulation of certain factors and circumstances some of which are partly related to his own personality and others are to the spirit of the age in which he lived and wrote.

Jonson's emphasis on correction and deflation grows out of his uneasy relation with the unruly Elizabethan playhouse audience. That audience has an appetite for novelty, for marvelous and sensational effects. As a condition of his profession, Jonson has to cater to that appetite, but he also aspires to correct and improve it. As a branded murderer, and a Roman Catholic, he has no recognized standing among the educated classes of his time. Yet as a playwright with a classical

background, he feels superior to the common ruck of the playhouse audience.

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